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The New Criterion

November 1988

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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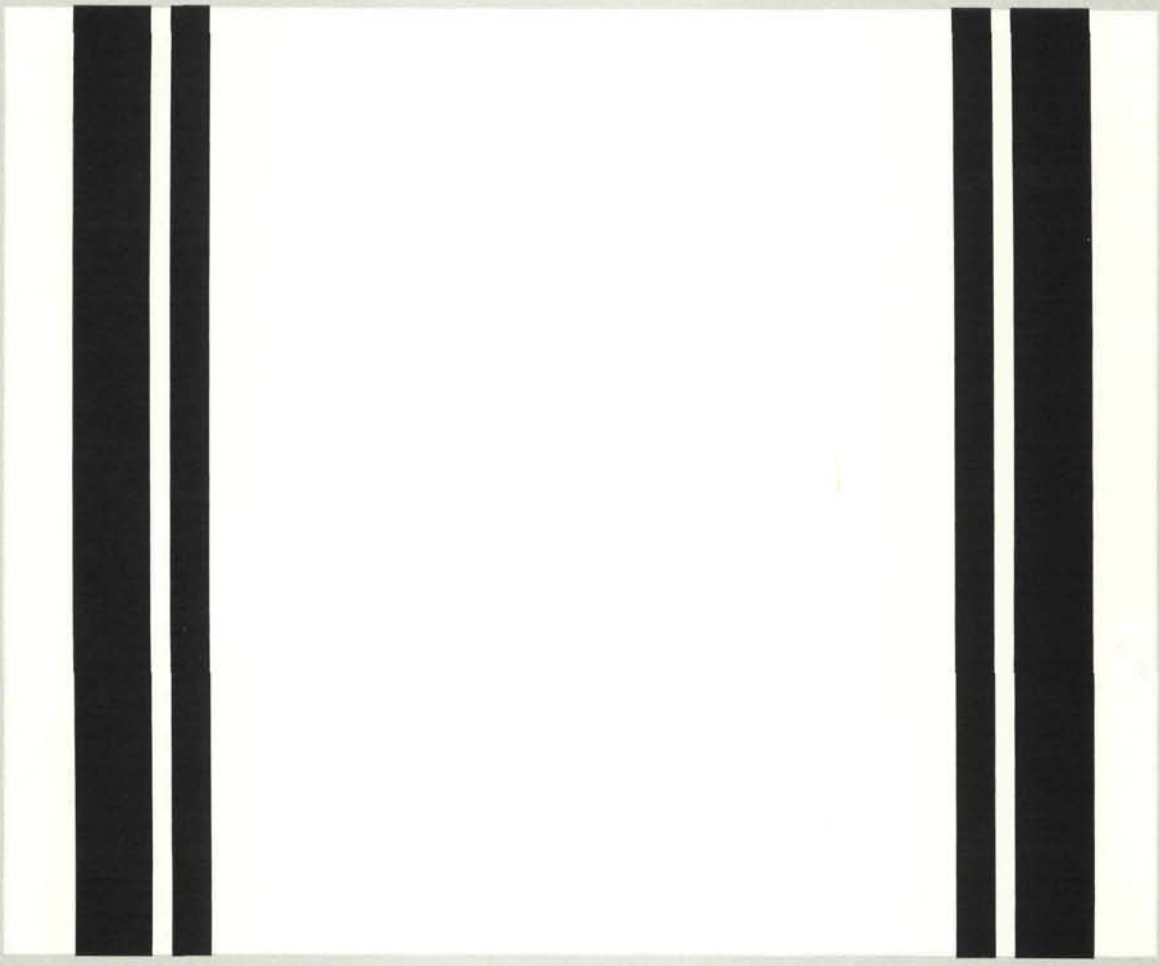

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Bruce Bawer's new book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has been published by Graywolf Press.

Peter Davison's most recent book is *Praying Wrong: New and Selected Poems, 1957-1985.*

Charles Edward Eaton is the author of *New and Selected Poems* (Cornwall, 1987).

Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays, *Partial Payments,* will be published in January by Norton.

Eric Gibson wrote on Bryan Hunt for the October issue of *The New Criterion.*

Jane Kenyon is the author of *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (Graywolf).

Samuel Lipman is the author of *Music After Modernism* and *The House of Music.*

Dana Mack wrote about Arnold Schoenberg for our February issue.

D. G. Myers is a graduate student in English at Northwestern University.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has just been published by North Point Press.

Donna Rifkind wrote on Henry Roth for the February issue of *The New Criterion.*

Terry Teachout is a member of the editorial board of the New York *Daily News.* He is preparing a selection of Whittaker Chambers's journalism, to be published next year by Regnery Gateway.

Karen Wilkin wrote on Georges Braque for our October issue.

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Leadership in democratic culture: the case of Nancy Hanks

by Samuel Lipman

In the preface to his new and fascinating memoir of Nancy Hanks,[1] the much-admired second chairman (1969-1977) of the National Endowment for the Arts, Michael Straight, her deputy during her years in office, makes a proud claim for their joint place in the history of our Republic: "We had worked together," he writes, "to create a democratic culture at a high level in America." While one would hardly want to claim felicity for the use of the word "create" in a context of bureaucratic policy making, fulfilling the role of cultural leadership on behalf of a proud nation is a goal neither trivial nor ignoble. To render productive the inevitable tension between a mass democracy flexible enough to accommodate the pressures of necessary change and a high culture based upon enduring standards of content and form is a task only the greatest leaders can accomplish.

It can hardly be said that the ideal of cultural leadership is as yet widely accepted in this country. Whenever the subject is raised, from the political and social Left are heard accusations of imperialist hegemony and social exploitation; from the Right come well-founded fears of official contumely and the stifling of individualism. In the sadly half-educated and apathetic center of American life, the ideal of leadership in art and learning bids fair to become at best the advocacy of genteel diversions and at worst the provision of fodder for the voracious maw of a debased popular culture.

And yet the need for "a democratic culture at a high level" goes on, for us as it does for all societies that would call themselves at once free and great. In the achievement of this freedom and greatness, the state, as the nominee of the nation, may choose or may fail to choose to bear some of this responsibility. Two centuries ago, the oft-quoted words of Edmund Burke put it well:

> . . . the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.[2]

1 *Nancy Hanks: An Intimate Portrait*, by Michael Straight; Duke University Press, 429 pages, $22.50.

2 From *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, quoted in *Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Peter J. Stanlis, p. 471.

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High standards, surely, by which to judge anyone attempting to live in the maelstrom of Washington politics. Yet here as elsewhere these standards cry out to be applied to our elected and appointed leaders, and it speaks well for Mr. Straight that he himself has raised the issue of leadership in the context of federal cultural policy, and has devoted so much of his book to recounting how Nancy Hanks, with his devoted cooperation, accomplished her tasks.

Viewed solely in human terms, the story of Nancy Hanks is often touching and, in the end, deeply moving. Born in 1927 in Florida, the daughter of prosperous parents curiously unsure in social standing, she attended then-fashionable Duke University. She seems to have devoted little attention or interest to the arts and the humanities, but she did take courses in botany, economics, political science, and philosophy. Personable and attractive (she was once elected a May Queen), albeit hardly much of a scholar, she seemed destined for the kind of comfortable marriage that was so much the goal of well-brought-up young coeds in the mid-1940s.

But there was another side to this seeming belle. While the young Nancy Hanks had little interest in what for Mr. Straight were the burning issues of the day facing her because she was southern, white, female, and American,[3] she was active in campus politics, becoming successively freshman representative to and then treasurer of the student government, house president, and finally, as a senior, president of the student government. All in all, despite her success in college life, she wasn't much of an opinion shaper, remaining (in the words of her roommate) "more a tool of the establishment than a member of the establishment."

Upon her graduation from Duke in 1949, Nancy Hanks seemed at loose ends and unable to make up her mind about the future, though she did want to go to Washington. The death of her brother the next year, shortly after his graduation from high school, concentrated her parents' attention on her, inspiring in her father dreams of a brilliant career and in her mother a concentration on marriage and childbearing. Despite many suitors, the young woman decided on a career. Washington continued to beckon, and a letter from her father to his friend Charles E. Wilson, then working for Harry Truman as Chairman of the Office of Defense Mobilization, secured her a job interview. When it immediately became plain that she couldn't "cook, type, or sew," she was offered a job as a receptionist. Knowing at the outset what she was always to understand, she chose to do what was asked of her rather than demand immediate preferment.

On February 3, 1953, her life changed. On that day, she met Nelson Rockefeller, the new chairman of Dwight Eisenhower's Advisory Committee on Government Organization. Rockefeller was then in his mid-forties, innovative, energetic, charming, and sympathetic. Determined to make his mark in American political life, he spewed forth ideas and plans; one of these ideas called for the establishment of a cabinet-level Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. President Eisenhower and the Congress agreed, and Rockefeller was chosen as the department's second in command. Nancy Hanks became his tireless confidential secretary, "ready to work from dawn until darkness." In the words of a woman friend:

> She was glued to Nelson. He would head for Capitol Hill; she would accompany him. That was when she learned to deal with congressmen and senators—he was so persuasive, in his

3 In this regard, it must be remembered that while Nancy Hanks was a young student at Duke, Mr. Straight, then in his forties, was, as of 1946, the publisher of the family-owned *The New Republic*, a left-leaning magazine edited by Henry Wallace, Vice-President of the United States from 1941 to 1945 and Secretary of Commerce in the Truman Administration until his pro-Stalin speeches on foreign policy caused him to be fired after one year in office.

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> relentless way. She listened as he argued. She didn't say much, but she didn't forget anything. She kept tabs on everything that was going on. She attended all of the conferences and all of the strategy sessions. She came to know everyone, and they came to respect her.

When Rockefeller left HEW (as it soon became known in acronym-loving Washington) to become a special assistant to the President for cold war strategy, he took Nancy Hanks along with him. She did more than assist her boss in his government tasks; as Mr. Straight strongly suggests (and as was long rumored in capital gossip), the young woman from the South and the married multi-millionaire politician, then living apart from his first wife, seem to have become lovers. She appears to have saved only one letter from him; it reads, in part, "Nancy, there is nothing more beautiful . . . than our love." The gentlemanly Mr. Straight's comment is telling: "What more can and should be said on this score?"

Despite Rockefeller's willingness to leave his wife, it appears from Mr. Straight's account that Nancy Hanks refused to marry him, thereby earning the enduring respect of the Rockefeller family. By 1955 their relationship cooled, and he went back to New York and his wife. She continued to work for him, spending much time acting as liaison with Henry Kissinger on the national-security inquiries Rockefeller had commissioned as part of his first drive for the White House. By 1959 she was working with Nelson's brother Laurence on an ecological study; more importantly, somewhere around 1963 she began to work with eldest brother John D. Rockefeller 3rd on what was to prove her niche for her final twenty years, the advocacy and support first of the performing arts and then of the arts in general.

It is indeed curious, given Nancy Hanks's intense association with the arts during the last and most consequential period of her life, that nothing in her past presaged such an outcome. As a young person, she seems to have had no ability or interest in the arts; in her work with Nelson Rockefeller, the arts—despite his own passionate interest in painting and sculpture—don't seem to have come up at all. She described her first encounter about the arts with John D. in an almost deadpan manner:

> John D. Rockefeller 3rd said to me, "If the techniques that my brothers Nelson and Laurence have used . . . are applicable to areas of public policy like education or health, why shouldn't we apply those same methods to an area which, I believe, relates to public policy—the arts?"
>
> Well, I said yes. I said it too quickly. I really did not have any understanding of what I meant.
>
> What we found out was this: while it was exactly right that the performing arts should be looked at as a matter of public policy . . . we did not realize how difficult it would be.

It will be remembered that in 1965 the Rockefeller Brothers Fund published its influential Panel Report on the performing arts; while stopping short of recommending substantial and direct federal funding, the Rockefeller Report attempted to make a powerful case for the value of the arts and of increased national attention to their support. This case, like all those that have been made by influential personalities and reports in the years since the Rockefeller Report was published, was based on a calculus of pleasure for the consumer rather than of centrality to the expression and preservation of the values of civilized society.[4]

Nancy Hanks's name is on the report as a member of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Arts Planning Committee, and as the head of the staff responsible for the report. With Rockefeller sponsorship, she soon became active in the burgeoning community arts

4 In the preface, signed by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, to the Rockefeller Report, this ultimate rationale for the arts is succinctly stated: "The arts today are more fully appreciated as one means by which man can achieve the satisfactions he seeks, and therefore are important, even essential, to the human mind and spirit."

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council movement. In 1968 she became the president of the Associated Councils for the Arts,[5] the umbrella organization of groups responsible for the administration of local public funding. In her work across the country on behalf of arts support, she was as always careful to eschew the high road of intellectual conviction and rhetorical grandeur. An associate described her approach to public speaking in these terms:

> She had a very interesting technique. She defused criticism. She'd always start out by saying, "I'm just a poor little country girl, and here I am in my housecoat and curlers, and all I want to do is to make something nice happen."

Mr. Straight's comment on the above quotation—with all the abdication of responsibility it suggests—is laconic, and (at least to me) sadly accurate: "It worked."

As Nancy Hanks's career began increasingly to take on a wider aspect, two dramas which were mightily to affect her life, one private and the other public, were being played out. In 1962, she suffered her first brush with the cancer which was to kill her twenty-one years later. Her initial mastectomy was followed the next year by a hysterectomy, and as the cancer recurred, she was often hospitalized and laid low by the effects of intensive chemotherapy. Throughout this lengthy ordeal, she behaved with exemplary courage and self-control, concealing the extent of her illness and often even the fact of the illness itself from her closest friends and co-workers.

As her health became increasingly problematic, the public progress of federal arts support was gathering force. In the early 1960s costs associated with producing the performing arts were fast outstripping box office income; such large-scale foundation help as was available—in particular the Ford Foundation orchestra grants in the late 1960s—only raised budgets without providing a long-term commitment. Individual patronage, though often available for bricks and mortar, seemed increasingly unwilling and unable to cover the dreary succession of yearly operating deficits always characteristic of arts institutions. Into this void stepped the federal government, at first, in the Kennedy administration, only with words and personalities, and then, in 1965, with the signing by Lyndon Johnson of the enabling legislation for the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.

The early federal funds appropriated were small: in fiscal 1966, the first arts programming subsidies amounted to no more than 2.5 million dollars. Under the NEA's first chairman, Roger Stevens, patronage was scattered, and, judging by a new and dismaying book written by Livingston Biddle, Stevens's deputy and the agency's chairman in the Carter administration, unduly subject to personal whim and caprice.[6] But the appropriations continued to increase, and, by fiscal 1970, as Richard Nixon took office, the amount available to the NEA for programming had risen to 8.25 million dollars. It is here that Mr. Straight's story of the rise of his heroine becomes particularly interesting, for he describes in hitherto unknown detail the labyrinthine and indeed Byzantine process by which, with the savvy assistance of presidential advisor Leonard Garment, the Rockefeller family retainer Nancy Hanks became the Chairman of the NEA under the decidedly Rockefeller-hating Richard Nixon.

At the NEA she devoted her life to the task of running the agency. She was very much of a hands-on administrator, delegating no ultimate responsibility for anything and attempting to oversee everything, down to the physical condition of the offices in which her staff worked. During her years as chairman, she had little personal life, taking work home and coming in to the office on weekends—and expecting others to do the

5 Now the American Council for the Arts, a leading national arts advocacy and governmental lobbying organization.

6 *Our Government and the Arts: Perspectives from the Inside,* by Livingston Biddle; ACA Books, 539 pages, $24.95.

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same. In return for her demands, she treated her staff as a large family, showing great concern for them as well as a consuming interest in whatever lives they managed to live outside the agency. She earned the deep loyalty of her associates, a loyalty which for most of them has lasted through the years since her death.

She did more than earn the title of "matriarch." She showed an intuitive understanding of the essential difference between administrative control and staff advice. Doubtless many were uncomfortable with her rigorous making of this distinction, but despite Mr. Straight's criticism of her administrative style, it is evident from his own testimony that he too profited from her courage and grip:

> As Nancy's deputy . . . I was never entrusted with any administrative authority. At times my colleagues wondered if I was wise in allowing myself to be demeaned. To me, it wasn't a matter of wisdom. I was happy carrying out my assignments, armed as I was with Nancy's reflected power. At the same time, I was free of the burdens of final responsibility. Had I held that responsibility, I would have had to act upon my convictions; firing staff members who I felt were unproductive and abolishing programs which I believed were inappropriate and wasteful. For me it was easier to take my stands; to see my recommendations accepted or rejected, to wait until events proved me right or wrong.

As subservient as Nancy Hanks had been in working for the Rockefellers, with Nixon she pursued a different tack entirely. From the outset she demanded a larger NEA budget; her argument fell on unpredictably sympathetic ears, for despite Nixon's overall commitment to cutting the federal budget, he had been convinced by his advisors that support for the arts and for culture was an inexpensive way of repairing the political damage done to his presidency, first by cuts in social programs and later by his intermittently vigorous prosecution of the Vietnam War.

The winning "terms" (as Mr. Straight calls them) on which Nancy Hanks served were simple: "immediate, rapid, and continuous growth." The result of Nixon's political needs and her immensely skillful lobbying within the White House and with Congress was a total victory for budget expansion. The first Hanks NEA budget provided 15.09 million dollars for programming; her final budget, eight years later, provided 94 million. So great was the Hanks budgetary momentum, and so total was her victory in convincing both the executive and legislative branches that the arts were good things for grantor as well as grantee, that even when she left the agency, it continued to grow. The NEA budget in fiscal 1978 (the first year of Livingston Biddle's term) reached $123.85 million.

What did all this spending amount to in terms of the creation, to use Mr. Straight's prefatory words once again, of "a democratic culture at a high level in America"? At almost the end of his book, he comes close to answering his own question: her legacy, he writes, "lies in the arts themselves rather than in any concept of the role of government in relation to the arts." In saying that her effect was "in the arts themselves," it is unclear whether Mr. Straight means that she actually affected the *nature* of the artworks created during her tenure or only changed the *volume* of arts-related activity.

There can be little cause for arguing that Nancy Hanks had a direct influence on the art that was created while she was in office. Only the foolish would have expected her—or, for that matter, any other public official—to create culture itself. Artistic creation is, as always, the primary responsibility of artists; the actual creation of the component works of civilization is no more a responsibility of political leaders than is the living of citizens' lives for them.

Insofar as she influenced art, it seems to me she did so by propagating the idea that the vitality of artistic life was to be judged by considerations of quantity rather than quality. In general, she was at pains not to sepa-

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rate the idea of "more" from that of "better"; to put it another way, she failed to distinguish quantity from quality. By Mr. Straight's own testimony, when Nancy Hanks campaigned strenuously in 1976 for her reappointment by the newly arrived Carter administration to a third term, she signed a memorandum (over staff objection) to the President understating the volume of arts activity before she took office, and overstating it after her chairmanship.[7]

In general, her goal was the fact of large-scale funding in itself, rather than what was done with the funds. In this connection, Mr. Straight tells a story that would merely be funny if it did not so perfectly catch the way the public business in a democracy—not just in cultural matters—is so often done. It seems that Nancy Hanks decided early on that the NEA should fund projects—requiring yearly applications and agency determinations—rather than ongoing operating support formulaically determined on the basis of institutional budget size and need. The symphony orchestra field violently objected, feeling that project support forced them to undertake programs they neither desired nor needed, and in effect drained support from day-to-day activities. She persevered, requiring that orchestras justify their requests on the basis of their public outreach services rather than their continuing artistic needs. Mr. Straight explains how a *modus vivendi* was reached:

> . . . in time to come, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and other great orchestras dutifully lined up, requesting $100,000 a year in order to provide youth concerts and services for their communities. Then, as these services became embedded in the schedules of the orchestras, the contrast between project funding and formulaic funding was blurred. The orchestra managers found it easy to shuffle their financial accounts; the Endowment's panels, year after year, granted to the great orchestras the maximum sums which were available to them, and so the program, which began as project funding, turned into formula funding. As the Dodo said to Alice, "*Everyone* has won and *all* must have prizes!"

In reading the thousands and thousands of words Mr. Straight devotes to Nancy Hanks's labors, one searches in vain for any sort of an overarching understanding as to why the arts, and the civilization of which they form so constitutive a part, should be supported, not just by governments but by society as a whole and by its individual members. Her emphasis seems always to have been on the growth of the NEA, and on a kind of simple arts boosterism best demonstrated in her constantly employed technique of convincing resistant congressmen to support her requests by publicly reminding them of the grants the agency made in their constituencies. These crass arguments aside, one cannot help coming away from this book discomfited by just how little evidence there is that Nancy Hanks knew about—and by implication cared for—the living corpus of greatness whose support she advocated.

What evidence Mr. Straight provides in fact goes the other way. Thus he notes that "Nancy was ill at ease in dealing with literature. She had been trained by the Rockefellers to deal with institutions and with the performing arts. She had no background in literature and no sense of what she wanted to accomplish in supporting it." Just a few pages later, he states that "in architecture and design, as in literature, Nancy had no notion of what she wanted to accomplish when she took over the Arts Endowment." This lack of personal knowledge, experience, and interest in the matters with which she had to work sometimes caused

7 It must be said that Mr. Straight is so honest in these matters as to recognize that the conservative criticism of federal cultural support which surfaced in 1980 had a point, at least insofar as it applied to the Carter administration: the conservatives, he writes, "pressed too hard . . . to cut the Endowment back, yet they were right in arguing that quantitative data, reliable or unreliable, was [sic] a poor measure of the value and vitality of the arts."

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permanent harm: thus, when dealing with the problem of arts education, she took an anti-teacher and anti-classroom position which still haunts the relations between the NEA and the world of arts education. As Mr. Straight tells the story:

> She settled . . . for advocacy films which were mediocre and for rhetoric which served only to heighten the tensions which existed between teachers and artists at the classroom level. Thus in her speeches Nancy was fond of quoting children who spoke of their loathing for their teachers . . . .

Above all, in her advocacy of government support for the arts, Nancy Hanks left a legacy of defensiveness and over-reaction in the face of legitimate criticism. All too often she responded, as she did in defending a grant the NEA had made to an artist who spent the money to drop crepe-paper streamers from a light plane, by

> . . . in effect . . . saying, you cannot criticize any grant which I make unless you are prepared to condemn the entire structure of the Arts Endowment. It was as if, in a game of poker, she was saying to all of the players, I'll raise you, I'll bet every chip I hold in my hand. Fair enough, if her hand consisted of four aces. But, supposing she was holding a pair of deuces?

This short-sighted attitude became intensified during the succeeding and highly politicized Biddle regime at the NEA, and continues to affect relations between the Endowment and members of Congress, who find they cannot criticize particular actions of the Endowment without finding themselves branded as anti-art. In responding this way to criticism of individual grants and general policies, those responsible for the fortunes of the NEA have regularly missed opportunities not just to build a stronger and more efficient agency but to educate everyone, supporters and opponents alike, about the relationship between the health of art and civilization and the health of the nation.

Here, then, is the ultimate criterion for judging the success or failure of Nancy Hanks at the NEA. Her proper task was not to create art but to influence, in a profound way, the regnant conception of the place of art in the life of the Republic. Lacking as we do a prescriptive aristocracy and an established church, such influence must often come from duly constituted political leadership. In determining that she did not leave a legacy in the "role of government in relation to the arts," Mr. Straight clearly suggests that she failed in this, her highest function.

It is not possible to read Mr. Straight's memoir of his friend without a feeling of sympathy for Nancy Hanks's character and her labors, and without a sense of loss occasioned by our awareness of the disparity between what had to be done and what she was to leave behind. And so one cannot leave this subject without asking the most important question of all: just why did a person so bright, courageous, energetic, and warmhearted, so willing to work and so at home in the American social and political establishment, fail in this way? The answer must go to the core not only or even primarily of Nancy Hanks but of our own condition as a people. We, as she, have always tended to value scale over substance; we are, as she was, half-educated in the life of the mind and the world of our civilization; we are, as she was, all too willing to see political life and governmental service as the achievement of short-term, easily quantifiable objectives, rather than as the binding of a nation, through the furtherance of its cultural inheritance, to its highest political expression; as much as we are, as she was, willing to work, we spend too little time in reflection about our ultimate purposes and ends. Nowhere is the correction of these, our lacks, so important as it is now in the question of leadership in democratic culture.

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A touch of class

by Terry Teachout

The one indispensable answer to an environment bristling with people and things one thought were bad was to go on finding out new ways in which one could think they were bad.
—Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*

The trendy Amis, of course, is Martin, whose latest book, *Einstein's Monsters,* is described on the dust jacket as "Martin Amis's impassioned fictionalized protest against nuclear weapons . . . . The subject is depressing, almost unthinkable. But Amis makes of these stories a life-affirming lament." Such laments, taken in tandem with the equally stylish America-bashing of *The Moronic Inferno,* a recent collection of occasional essays, helped to make of Martin Amis a coming young man of English letters.

Martin's father used to be a coming young man of letters himself. When Kingsley Amis, an obscure poet and lecturer at a dreary South Wales university, published *Lucky Jim,* his first novel, in 1954, critics were quick to recognize in him a comic novelist on the order of the pre-*Brideshead* Evelyn Waugh. But Amis *père* spent the next three decades doing every unfashionable thing imaginable. He tried his hand at various types of genre fiction: ghost stories, spy stories, detective stories. He wrote a column for *Penthouse* called "Kingsley on Drink." He even wrote a James Bond novel.

The only thing Kingsley Amis never got around to doing was tinkering with his style, which has remained more or less unchanged throughout seventeen novels, a collection of short stories, and a diverse assortment of other books ranging from a biography of Rudyard Kipling to a history of science fiction. "What I think I am doing," Amis said in 1976, "is writing novels within the main English-language tradition, that is, trying to tell interesting, believable stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style: no tricks, no experimental foolery."

In time, Amis's politics would become as quaint as his prose style. The author of *Lucky Jim* was, like the other Angry Young Men who electrified English readers of the Fifties with their vigorous rejection of mandarin literary ways, a socialist of sorts. But Lucky Jim, as Amis put it in a 1967 essay, gradually turned right, a metamorphosis which shocked and dismayed many of his erstwhile fans. ("How could a chap like me, an intellectual with an interest in jazz and science fiction to protect me from total fuddy-duddyism, *possibly* not be on the Left?")

As Amis grew more obviously conservative, critics who once praised him began to dismiss him as a middle-aged hack incapable of realizing his youthful promise. Eventually, Amis even began to have trouble publishing his books in the United States, a dilemma with an inescapably political dimension. One novel, *Russian Hide-and-Seek,* never found an American publisher at all, while another, *Stanley and the Women,* became a *cause célèbre* on both sides of the

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Atlantic when word got out that feminist editors at three New York publishing houses, dismayed with the novel's alleged misogyny, had turned it down.

Kingsley Amis's sales, to be sure, have remained perfectly respectable. His last novel, *The Old Devils,* even won the 1987 Booker Prize, England's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and he continues to get good reviews. But the critical tide now runs against him. John Updike's 1979 review of *Jake's Thing* in *The New Yorker* made the latter-day case against Amis with dismaying clarity:

> [I]t is a rare sentence of his prose that surrenders to the demons of language, that abdicates a seat of fussy social judgment, that is there for its own sake, out of simple awe, gratitude, or dismay in the face of creation. His universe is claustrophobically human, and his ambition and reputation alike remain in thrall to the weary concept of the "comic novel."

This is an interesting, if obtuse, appraisal of Kingsley Amis, for it correctly singles out much of what is distinctive about his work. With a slight change of tone, some readers might even take it for high praise. But while all of Amis's novels are funny, many of them are far from "comic," at least in the specifically limiting sense Updike has in mind. His vision of modern life is surprisingly, even shockingly black, and the laughter of his finest work is the uneasy kind provoked by a sudden vision of the skull beneath the skin.

Like so many other comic writers, Kingsley Amis was born into middle-class drabness. William Amis, his father, was a senior clerk in the export department of Colman's Mustard whose cultural tastes ran to Gilbert and Sullivan and detective stories. "My parents," Amis remembered, "evidently underwent a fairly gruelling nonconformist nurturing in and around a Baptist chapel in south-east London. By the time I came along they had moved a certain distance away from this environment. The training they gave me was strong in morality, rudimentary and quite uninsistent in questions of doctrine apart from a conventional taboo or two."

Amis's father shared the common desire to see his only child ascend the slippery pole of class, and so young Kingsley was sent to a private preparatory school, where he earned a scholarship to St. John's College, Oxford, in 1941. Though wartime Oxford was a sober and austere place, the undergraduate Amis contrived to be known as a militant Labourite, a jazz fanatic, and a virtuoso mimic. Decades later, his classmate Philip Larkin would recall Amis's phenomenal abilities in this last capacity:

> [H]e used it as the quickest way of convincing you that something was horrible or boring or absurd—the local comrade ("Eesa poincher see . . . assa poincher see"), the Irish tenor ("the sarn wass dee-cli-neeng"), the University CSM ("Goo on, seh"), a Russian radio announcer reading in English a bulletin from the Eastern Front ("twelf field mortars"), his voice suffering slow distortion to unintelligibility followed by a sudden reversion to clarity ("aberbera mumf mumf General von Paulus").

Amis was drafted in 1942 and served in the Royal Corps of Signals. After the war, he returned to St. John's College, where he took a first in English in 1947 and, that same year, brought out a volume of poetry called *Bright November.* In 1948, he married Hilary Ann Bardwell, by whom he had two sons "who turned up very fast, one after the other"; in 1949, he accepted a job as a lecturer in English at the University College of Swansea in South Wales.

Amis was soon recognized as a poet of modest but genuine accomplishment. "Kingsley Amis," Philip Larkin said in 1964, "I admire very much as a poet . . . . I think he's utterly original and can hit off a kind of satiric poem that no one else can (this is when he is being himself, not when he's Robert Graves)." Like Larkin, Amis was a charter member of The Movement, the group of plain-spoken English poets whose work, according to Robert Conquest's 1956

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manifesto in the Movement anthology *New Lines,* was animated by "a refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensive language" and "a negative determination to avoid bad principles."

By the time these words appeared in print Kingsley Amis had already written *Lucky Jim.* Immediately upon its publication in 1954, this comic portrait of an inept young college professor from the lower middle class drew lavish praise from critics and readers in England and America. Even Somerset Maugham was impressed by the book, although he found Amis's scruffy characters disturbing. As he explained in his *Sunday Times* review:

> This is a new class that has entered upon the scene. It is the white-collar proletariat. Mr. Kingsley Amis is so talented, his observation is so keen, that you cannot fail to be convinced that the young men he so brilliantly describes truly represent the class with which his novel is concerned. They do not go to the university to acquire culture, but to get a job, and when they have got one, scamp it . . . . A few will go into Parliament, become Cabinet Ministers and rule the country. I look upon myself as fortunate that I shall not live to see it.

Clearly what distressed Maugham was not so much the novel as the postwar England in which it was set. Just as Kingsley Amis's Oxford had been a dour institution caught in an uncomfortable transition from the plovers' eggs of Charles Ryder to the austerities of a country at war, so was Amis's England turning into something strange and new: a centralized welfare state which, for all the earnest intentions of its founders, remained far from classless.

Young men like Jim Dixon, the hero of *Lucky Jim,* were stalwartly attempting to crash the economic and social barriers of class during the Fifties, and Amis was acutely aware of their struggles. His portrait of Professor Welch, the small-time cosmopolitan, with his madrigal sings and his readings of Anouilh in the original and his dogs named Ego and Id, rings every bit as true as that of Jim Dixon, who freely confesses to having specialized in medieval studies because "the medieval papers were a soft option in the Leicester course."

Where did the young Kingsley Amis learn to turn class differences into a source of biting comedy? For years, the American paperback edition of *Lucky Jim* carried on its cover the following blurb from Arthur Mizener: "No one has been so funny in this vein since Evelyn Waugh was at his best." While Amis has consistently acknowledged the influence of Waugh, he has also been careful not to overemphasize it. "I'm flattered," he said in 1985, "but the analogy is misleading. Waugh wrote very elegant comedy. His people spoke beautifully. Compared with his works, mine look like grim documentaries."

The grim settings and situations of Amis's early novels suggest another, less obvious source. Robert Conquest, writing in *New Lines,* cited "George Orwell, with his principle of real, rather than ideological honesty" as an important influence on the Movement poets, and it is a very short journey from the drab prewar England of *Coming Up for Air* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* to the equally drab postwar England of Jim Dixon, a scholarship boy who, like one of Orwell's hapless heroes, might easily have wound up selling insurance door to door or working in a second-hand bookshop had he been born twenty years earlier.

Still, Amis has at all times been a comic novelist, one who shared with Orwell a consuming interest in popular fiction. "The reading on which my writing has been founded," Amis wrote in 1986, "was always various, even indiscriminate, including as it did and taking seriously not only 'straight' novels but adventure stories, ghost stories, spy stories, detective stories, science fiction." When asked in 1975 to name the modern writers who had most influenced him, Amis mentioned Waugh, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, the early Joyce—and P. G. Wodehouse.

Asked what advice he would give to a young comic novelist, Wodehouse said: "I'd give him practical advice, and that is always get to the dialogue as soon as possible. I

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always feel the thing to go for is speed . . . . I think the success of every novel—if it's a good novel of action—depends on the high spots. The thing to do is to say to yourself, 'Which are my big scenes?' and then get every drop of juice out of them." *Lucky Jim* follows this advice to the letter. Like nearly all of Amis's novels, it begins *in medias res* ("'They made a silly mistake, though,' the professor of history said, and his smile, as Dixon watched, gradually sank beneath the surface of his features at the memory") and charges directly into an action-packed plot in which set piece follows set piece with the relentless speed of *Right Ho, Jeeves* or *The Mating Season*.

From the beginning, Amis's knack for mimicry proved to be an invaluable novelistic means of depicting the nuances of class. Amis's characters, like Waugh's, are defined by their accents and their use of language. ("He quickly decided on a bluff, speak-my-mind approach as the best cloak for rudeness, past or to come . . . . Deliberately intensifying his northern accent, Dixon said: 'Afraid I got off on the wrong foot with you last night.'") But while the young Waugh, following the example of Ronald Firbank, allowed his dialogue to speak almost entirely for itself, the young Amis sets his off, Wodehouse-style, with ironic commentary:

> If Welch didn't speak in the next five seconds, he'd do something which would get himself flung out without possible question—not the things he'd often dreamed of when sitting next door pretending to work. He no longer wanted, for example, to inscribe on the departmental timetable a short account, well tricked out with obscenities, of his views on the professor of history, the Department of History, medieval history, history, and Margaret and hang it out of the window for the information of passing students and lecturers, nor did he, on the whole, now intend to tie Welch up in his chair and beat him about the head and shoulders with a bottle until he disclosed why, without being French himself, he'd given his sons French names.

Kingsley Amis, as this passage suggests, was very much on the rampage in *Lucky Jim*. His own understanding of what he was attacking was not yet fully developed, though, and it is not surprising that *Lucky Jim* was widely read, even by so perceptive a critic as Edmund Wilson, as a fairly straightforward paean to English socialism: "Uncertain and perplexed though they are, [Amis's characters] have still something to build, to win . . . . The only things they have behind them to brace them are the victory of the Labour Government in 1945, the ideals of the Welfare State, and they hold out as best they can, at the cost of much nervous strain, much confusion of social relations, much sacrifice of individual dignity."

To be sure, *Lucky Jim* does pay homage to the egalitarian values of the Labour Party. ("If one man's got ten buns and another's got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns.") But Jim Dixon's rebelliousness is less political than personal. He is, for instance, as quick to snap at "phoniness" as Holden Caulfield, his near-contemporary, and inclined to bristle defensively at the appearance of anything having to do with high culture ("The piece was recognisable to Dixon as some skein of untiring facetiousness by filthy Mozart").

Part of what Dixon and his creator were rebelling against, although this fact is not made explicit in *Lucky Jim*, was modernism. Speaking of the Angry Young Men as a group, an older Amis pointed out that "there was certainly no rebelliousness at all of treatment or presentation [in our books]. And we were, in that sense, reactionaries rather than rebels. We were trying to get back, let's say, to the pre-Joyce tradition, really—but not very consciously." For many of Amis's contemporaries, this rebellion would at times be scarcely distinguishable from out-and-out philistinism; Dixon's reflexive dislike of "filthy Mozart" is not so very far away from Philip Larkin's railing against "things that seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like *Finnegans Wake* and Picasso."

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Amis's relationship to high culture, of course, is a great deal more ambivalent than the word "philistine" would suggest. Far from regarding Mozart as "filthy," for instance, Amis is an extremely well-informed music lover, and two of his later novels, *Girl, 20* and *The Alteration,* make convincing use of classical musicians as major characters. Amis's real quarrel, which he shared with Orwell and with the rest of the Angry Young Men, was not so much with high culture per se as with the pretentious upper-crust mandarinism of Cyril Connolly and the *Horizon* group. (Significantly, one of the things about Professor Welch that irritates Jim Dixon most is his interest in things French.)

Jim Dixon's greatest frustrations arise from of his difficulties with women. Like so many of Amis's later novels, *Lucky Jim* contains two contrasting principal female characters: Margaret, the sexual predator who symbolizes everything hostile and disagreeable and confusing about her sex, and Christine, whose behavior is equally confusing but who is prettier, more desirable, and far more agreeable. Like Orwell, Amis is quick to endow this sexual contrast with strong overtones of class conflict:

> The notion that women like [Christine] were never on view except as the property of men like [Professor Welch's son] was so familiar to him that it had long since ceased to appear an injustice. The huge class that contained Margaret was destined to provide his own womenfolk: those in whom the intention of being attractive could sometimes be made to get itself confused with performance .... But renewal always came: a new sweater would somehow scale down the large feet, generosity revivify the brittle hair, a couple of pints site positive charm in talk of the London stage or French food.

In *Lucky Jim,* the conflict is resolved predictably: Jim Dixon triumphs over the barriers of class, getting the nice girl and a better job and thumbing his nose at his snooty enemies. "The shits," Amis said of *Lucky Jim* in 1987, "all get their comeuppance in the end." This unabashedly happy ending is typical of the kind of book Kingsley Amis would write at regular intervals throughout the rest of his career: fast, funny, and not too long, with all the loose ends tied up neatly in the last chapter. But *Lucky Jim* also served as the calling card of an author of real promise, and his subsequent books would make good on this promise, sometimes in thoroughly unpredictable ways.

Given the enormous success of *Lucky Jim,* Kingsley Amis could have easily gone dry or, worse, repeated himself mechanically in sequel after sequel. Indeed, Jim Dixon might have made a rather charming series character, a sort of welfare-state Bertie Wooster. But Amis chose instead to follow up *Lucky Jim* in 1955 with the novel *That Uncertain Feeling,* the story of John Lewis, a Welsh librarian who finds himself entangled in an extramarital affair with a bitchy woman who, having married money, is looking for sexual adventure as well. Like *Lucky Jim, That Uncertain Feeling* is fast and funny, but its tone is far more unsettling, and the best Amis can contrive in the way of a happy ending is his hero's reluctant decision to leave town and take a lower-paying job at (of all places) a coal mine, there to remain faithful to his long-suffering wife and their children.

Throughout his career, Amis would alternate between straightforwardly comic novels like *I Like It Here* (1958) and *One Fat Englishman* (1963) and more adventurous books like *That Uncertain Feeling* and *Take a Girl Like You,* a longish novel dating from 1960 which tells the story of a beautiful young woman named Jenny Bunn and her determined struggle to remain virginal. *Take a Girl Like You,* like its predecessors, is set in Amisland, the sooty, shabby industrial town up the road from Wigan Pier where good jobs grow on other people's bushes and the landladies serve cheap breakfasts. "I kept a very thick and detailed notebook for *Take a Girl Like You*—about a hundred pages," Amis later recalled, and the result strongly

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resembles an old-fashioned social novel in its sober proliferation of detail. But Amis's purpose is uncertain. The greater length of *Take a Girl Like You* is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in gravity, and the reader ultimately feels that underneath the descriptive padding, the book's real scope is no greater than that of such lighter efforts as *Lucky Jim* or *That Uncertain Feeling.*

By this time, Kingsley Amis had revealed quite a bit about himself in the various essays and articles which were later collected in *What Became of Jane Austen?* (1970). The journalistic Amis is to some extent a theatrical creation, a beef-eating pantomime Englishman who, for all his untutored literary shrewdness, is nonetheless quite pleased to dismiss highbrow books like *Lolita* as "thoroughly bad" and "suffocatingly narrow," opting instead for a diverse assortment of popular wordsmiths ranging from Warwick Deeping to Mickey Spillane:

> It might well be agreed that the best of serious fiction, so to call it, is better than anything any genre can offer. But this best is horribly rare, and a clumsy dissection of the heart is so much worse than boring as to be painful, and most contemporary novels are like spy novels with no spies or crime novels with no crimes, and John D. MacDonald is by any standards a better writer than Saul Bellow, only MacDonald writes thrillers and Bellow is a human-heart chap, so guess who wears the top-grade laurels?

Though the Kingsley Amis of *What Became of Jane Austen?* is something of a lowbrow poseur, he is also a perfectly sincere fan of genre fiction, and this affection led Amis to produce a book which was at once his first fully successful attempt at expanding the boundaries of the traditional comic novel and his first outright genre novel. Published in 1966, *The Anti-Death League* is a seriocomic spy thriller about Operation Apollo, a top-secret biological warfare experiment conducted by the British Army and aimed at Red China. Amis's large cast of characters exists not merely to exploit the rich comic potential of military life but to dramatize a far more serious problem: how to make sense of a godless world.

The progress of Operation Apollo is disrupted when Captain Max Hunter, an alcoholic homosexual, causes a scandal in the unit by secretly distributing leaflets advertising the formation of an "anti-death league" which has no purpose and no program save to enhance public outrage at the meaningless way some people die. ("*Case No. 1:* A woman of about 30 years old was dishing up the family supper. She took a potato out of the dish and popped it in her mouth. It lodged in her throat and she died of asphixiation [sic] then and there, in front of her husband and 3 young children who were present at the time.")

Hunter's private anguish acquires added immediacy when his friend James Churchill, the hero of *The Anti-Death League,* falls in love with Catharine Casement, who promptly discovers that she is suffering from breast cancer. The absurdity of the world in which they live is emphasized when Operation Apollo is revealed to be an elaborate ruse undertaken for arcane strategic reasons. The message of the novel is stated explicitly by Catharine: "You knew very well that it's up to people not to get on with the bad things God has invented for them. It's their job to show they're better than he is."

Kingsley Amis's early novels are full of dark hints that the world is under the thumb of an actively malevolent creator. ("You atheist?" Yevgeny Yevtushenko once asked Kingsley Amis. His reply: "Well, yes, but it's more that I hate him.") *The Anti-Death League* is Amis's first full-scale treatment of this theme, and despite occasional lapses into sentimentality, it remains an impressive achievement, both for its emotional depth and for the ingenious way in which it uses the techniques of the thriller to serve more ambitious satirical ends. Kingsley Amis is still angry, but he is no longer so naïve as to think that the world can be made noticeably better by taking a few extra buns from the rich and giving them to the poor.

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In 1967, Kingsley Amis published an essay called "Why Lucky Jim Turned Right" in which he announced his acceptance of the conservative vision of human nature and its limits. ("Many of the evils of life—failure, loneliness, fear, boredom, inability to communicate—are ineradicable by political means.") Amis's political conversion was initially stimulated by his growing awareness of "more and more voluminous and unignorable evidence" of the evils of Communism, much of which was doubtless brought to his attention by his friend and colleague Robert Conquest. But his greatest contempt was reserved not for committed Communists but for the hopelessly phony "wets" of Sixties England:

> I mean the kind of person who . . . professes neutralism while reciting Hanoi's line; who says the East European satellites are really swinging places that have stopped bothering with politics; who used—when it was more newsy—to go on about Ian Smith's Fascist regime; who thinks student freedom is impaired when a college applies its statutes; who buys unexamined the abortion-divorce-homosexuality-censorship-racialism-marijuana package; in a word, the Lefty.

These concerns would become the subject matter of the 1968 novel *I Want It Now,* a fast-moving situation comedy in four sharply contrasted tableaux which focuses on the bumpy courtship of a glib young talk-show host on the make and a sexy, slightly deranged American heiress. *I Want It Now* takes on two ambitious subjects: the irresponsible rich and the trendy Left. Ronnie Appleyard is much like Jim Dixon, but he lives in a post-*Lucky Jim* world whose increased upward mobility has made it possible for refugees from the lower middle class to aspire to infinitely more stately mansions—at the price of their souls.

For all its underlying seriousness, Ronnie Appleyard's story in *I Want It Now* is told within the modest compass of the comic novel. Appleyard's frenzied efforts, like those of Jim Dixon, bring him happiness in the end; he keeps his job, gets the girl, and even becomes a less wet, more humane person into the bargain. ("I was a shit when I met you. I still am in lots of ways. But because of you I've had to give up trying to be a dedicated, full-time shit. I couldn't make it, hadn't the strength of character.") Similarly, Amis's next novel, *The Green Man* (1969), for all its considerable interest, remains safely within the precincts of the ghost story. With *Girl, 20* (1971), however, Amis takes as great a forward stride as he had five years earlier with *The Anti-Death League.*

On the surface, *Girl, 20* looks suspiciously like yet another of Amis's Wodehousean pastiches: short, brilliantly concentrated, full of sharp verbal satire and richly comic set pieces. But the humor in *Girl, 20* is ferociously dark, even more so than in *The Anti-Death League,* and Sir Roy Vandervane, the anti-hero of the novel, is the most complex character Amis has yet created. Sir Roy is a musician of real, if second-rate, talent. But he is also a first-rate phony, for his politics are casually leftish (by now a reliably bad sign in any Amis character) while his private life is entirely subordinated to the increasingly desperate pursuit of nubile, ever-younger women.

The amorous adventures of Sir Roy and Douglas Yandell, the music critic and amateur pianist who serves as narrator, keep the focus of *Girl, 20* squarely on women and their discontents, a perfectly natural development for an author whose first marriage had recently ended in divorce. Accordingly, the portrait of love in the Sixties sketched by Amis in *Girl, 20* is altogether forbidding. In *The Anti-Death League,* Amis allowed his principal characters the solace of love in the midst of chaos. Not so in *Girl, 20.* Kitty, Sir Roy's wife, is doomed to a life of unhappy solitude; Penny, his daughter, becomes a heroin addict; Sylvia, his seventeen-year-old mistress, is a practitioner of "moral vandalism" who is clearly psychopathic. Even Vivienne, Douglas Yandell's charmingly eccentric girlfriend, walks out on him at the end of *Girl, 20* because, despite his solid,

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even stodgy aesthetic values, Douglas lacks the moral strength fully to commit himself to a romantic relationship.

In its fusion of high comedy and serious intent, *Girl, 20* represents an apotheosis of the Wodehouse-style comic novel. It also marks the high point of Amis's use of language as a medium through which the social and cultural follies of English life can be savagely guyed. ("It was . . . a quartet, or chamber concerto for violin, with parts for sitar, bass guitar and bongoes. Across the top of the first sheet *Elevations 9* was written, perhaps by way of title. I felt a particular loathing for that 9: either there were eight other *Elevations* or the numeral was arbitrary, a piece of decor, which was nearly as bad.")

Perhaps inevitably, the novels which followed *Girl, 20* were all less successful in their various ways. *The Riverside Villas Murder* and *The Alteration* are well-made genre novels, the first an old-fashioned detective story, the second an exceptionally clever "alternate world" fantasy about what England would have been like in 1976 if the Protestant Reformation had never taken place; *Ending Up* (1974), a tale of old age and physical decline, is a mordant but slight variation on Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori.*

Jake's Thing, by contrast, is a clear attempt to recapture the darkly comic mood of *Girl, 20,* this time taking as a point of departure the adventures of a middle-aged man who, finding himself impotent, dives crotch-first into the therapy racket. The subject is promising, allowing Amis to focus on the affectations of postwar English culture and the war between the sexes, two of his favorite targets. But the treatment is too obviously studied; one feels that Amis is self-consciously "doing" the world of psychobabble in *Jake's Thing* and that his satirical shots are insufficiently incisive for so gifted a marksman.

More disturbing is the obvious coarsening of Amis's prose style. The author of *Jake's Thing* is no longer capable of the lapidary concentration of *Girl, 20.* His ear is less sure, his style less pithy. This loss of tautness can be found to an even greater degree in *Russian Hide-and-Seek,* a fantasy about England under Soviet rule. *Russian Hide-and-Seek* may have been turned down by American publishers for political reasons, but it remains Amis's weakest novel for artistic ones.

In *Stanley and the Women,* published in 1984, Kingsley Amis moves for the first time since *The Anti-Death League* beyond the narrow technical confines of the comic and genre novels. Longer and more serious in tone than *Jake's Thing,* this book is the climax of Amis's growing tendency to regard the war between men and women as a permanent and unwinnable battle; indeed, *Stanley and the Women* almost seems at first glance to be the finished novel for which *Jake's Thing* was merely a preliminary study.

Stanley Duke, the hero and narrator of *Stanley and the Women,* is a middle-aged businessman with a good job and a seemingly happy second marriage. His teenage son, Steve, suddenly develops symptoms of what turns out to be schizophrenia, and Stanley's second wife simultaneously reveals that she no longer loves him. When Steve goes to a female psychiatrist, the reader is led to expect a brutal attack on feminism. Instead, Stanley goes much farther, arguing that not merely feminists but all women are amoral, untrustworthy monsters. There is no "good" woman character in *Stanley and the Women,* for both of Stanley's women, not to mention Steve's therapist, turn out to be predators of the very worst kind. The familiar predator-nice girl pairing of Amis's earlier novels has turned into something far more disturbing: predator-predator.

Midway through *Stanley and the Women,* Stanley Duke suggests that "women were like Russians—if you did exactly what they wanted all the time you were being realistic and constructive and promoting the cause of peace, and if you ever stood up to them you were resorting to cold-war tactics and pursuing imperialistic designs and interfering in their internal affairs." As readers of "Why

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Lucky Jim Turned Right" know, no comparison, coming from Amis, could be more damning. And the case against women is made even more directly at the end of the novel when a sympathetic male psychiatrist delivers the following speech:

> Good God, you've had wives, haven't you? And not impossibly had some acquaintance with other women as well? You can't be new to feeling the edge of the most powerful weapon in their armoury. You must have suffered before from the effect of their having noticed . . . that men are different, men quite often wonder whether they're doing the right thing and worry about it, men have been known to blame themselves for behaving badly, men not only feel they've made mistakes but on occasion will actually admit having done so, and say they're sorry, and ask to be forgiven, and promise not to do it again, and mean it. Think of that! Mean it. All beyond female comprehension. Which incidentally is why they're not novelists and must never be priests.

Stanley Duke is not wholly without a crude kind of sympathy for women. "The root of all the trouble," he says, "is we want to fuck them, the pretty ones, women I mean. Just try and imagine it happening to you, everyone wanting to fuck you wherever you go." But Stanley derives no comfort from his limited understanding of the feminine dilemma. At the end of *Jake's Thing,* Jake Richardson, offered a miracle cure, decides that he would rather remain impotent than have to put up with women. The end of *Stanley and the Women* is bleaker still: Stanley becomes reconciled with his second wife. "While she hurried on about having been so desperately frightened and upset and one thing and another," he says at the very end of the book, realizing that he is trapped in a hopeless, universal dilemma, "I turned towards Cliff, who did the brief lift of the chin South London people use to mean Told you so or Here we go again or Wouldn't you bleeding know. People elsewhere too, I dare say. Perhaps all over the world."

The uncontrolled rage of the male characters in *Stanley and the Women* is as disquieting as the continuing lack of focus in Amis's prose, and the knowledge that Amis's own second marriage (to the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard) had ended in divorce shortly before the publication of *Stanley and the Women* necessarily colors one's reading of this horrifying fictional portrait of a second marriage gone sour. Not surprisingly, many reviewers of *Stanley and the Women* went so far as to accuse Kingsley Amis of sharing the misogyny of Stanley Duke and his friends. "A novel," Amis retorted, "is not a report or a biographical statement or a confession. If it is a good novel, it dramatizes thoughts that some people, somewhere, have had. Haven't most men, at moments of high exasperation, thought, 'They're all mad'?"

The real message of *Stanley and the Women* probably lies somewhere between these two poles. Amis returns again and again in his novels to the theme of the extreme difficulty, if not hopelessness, inherent in human relationships; *Stanley and the Women* takes a more jaundiced (and less convincing) view than usual of the degree to which women are the cause of the problem.

Stanley and the Women is dedicated to "Hilly," Amis's first wife, to whom he grew more closely attached with advancing age. Amis's 1987 entry in *Current Biography* has as its penultimate sentence the following bald statement: "Amis lives in a self-contained ground-floor flat in a house in north London that he shares with his first wife and her third husband, Lord Kilmarnock." *The Old Devils,* written in 1986, suggests that these changes in Amis's life wrought a welcome transformation in his writing as well.

The scene of *The Old Devils* is Wales, locale of *That Uncertain Feeling,* and the action of the novel concerns the gradual reconciliation of a pair of aging lovers who parted nearly forty years before. There is no diminution of harshness in Amis's satire, but the world of *The Old Devils,* for all its disillusion and brutality, is one in which even the very old can achieve redemption of

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a limited but genuine kind through the power of love.

This is a note which has been missing from Amis's "serious" novels since *The Anti-Death League,* and it is made all the more powerful by the fact that he sounds it with a restored technical authority. In *The Old Devils,* the slackness of Amis's last few novels has hardened into a more persuasive narrative style. The rapidity and pithiness of his early comic efforts have been successfully exchanged for the subtleties of a broader fictional canvas. The cast of characters in *The Old Devils* is large, the plot accordingly complex, and while there is little of the sheer comic brilliance of *Lucky Jim* or *Girl, 20,* there is in its place an unforced human warmth. Rhiannon, the woman who triggers unexpected depths of feeling in most of the men in *The Old Devils,* is the first female character in Amis's work with the complexity and roundness of Jim Dixon or Max Hunter or Sir Roy Vandervane. No mere misogynist could possibly have imagined her, much less have written so deeply moving a story of old age and romantic love.

Amis's latest novel, *Difficulties with Girls,* recently published in England and due out here next year from Summit, represents a relaxation of the new-found expressive powers of *The Old Devils.* A sequel to *Take a Girl Like You, Difficulties with Girls* is an easy-going examination of the married life of Jenny Bunn, one of Amis's most engaging and sympathetic characters. As the title of the book suggests, *Difficulties with Girls* rings amusing changes on many of Amis's familiar themes. But *Difficulties with Girls,* clever, entertaining, and assured though it is, nonetheless adds little to our knowledge of Kingsley Amis. *The Old Devils* must remain his valedictory statement to date, and it is an impressive one. For a writer to have made so singular an artistic advance so late in his career is a truly noteworthy achievement, one which suggests that Amis's best work may still lie ahead of him.

Some reviewers thought that Kingsley Amis wrote *The Old Devils* as an act of literary contrition after the rage and malice of *Stanley and the Women.* Michiko Kakutani even suggested that "[i]nstead of making fun of his characters' dilemmas, Mr. Amis has chosen this time to write each of them—men and women—from the inside, and this decision . . . burnishes the entire novel with the luster of redemption." But Amis surely needs no redeeming. Though his cultural targets have shifted since the days of *Lucky Jim,* the wit with which he skewers them, and the outraged moral values on which that wit feeds, have remained constant; he is still "finding out new ways" to attack the bad things in an absurd world. Meanwhile, his early satirical thrusts have outlived their original social contexts and retained their sharpness and pertinence.

This is not to say that Amis is a great novelist. In fact, he has gone to some pains to avoid the traps that await the writer who purposefully aspires to greatness. Amis told an interviewer in 1975 that Gore Vidal's novels "suffer from American cleverness: the fear of being thought stupid, or dull, or behind the times. I think that's a very bad attitude for the novelist to adopt." Despite the deliberate modesty of his own artistic attitudes, Kingsley Amis has done virtually everything one might possibly expect of a novelist, particularly a comic one. To read Amis's novels in bulk, rather than merely dipping into *Lucky Jim* or *Stanley and the Women,* is to realize that he has created not a miscellaneous shelf of amusing entertainments but a distinctive oeuvre full of character and complexity.

Comparisons with Evelyn Waugh remain hard to resist. Waugh's classicism, his ruthless detachment, the silent but omnipresent religious underpinnings of his early books: all of these qualities lend to his best work a greater depth and artistic purity. But Amis still remains Waugh's closest postwar counterpart, a genre writer of satirical bent whose output is nonetheless far more serious and satisfying than that of most of his peers and virtually all of his juniors, Amis *fils* included. Some of his novels may well prove to be "major," and one cannot doubt that most of them will continue to be read with real pleasure.

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Boccioni's future: a retrospective

by Karen Wilkin

What a good idea the Umberto Boccioni retrospective was. Most of us know very little about this founding member of the vociferous Italian avant-garde movement known as Futurism. A few key images, legacies of art-history courses and visits to the Museum of Modern Art, serve to define him: the plunging red horse of his 1910 painting *The City Rises,* and the amazing bronze whirligig of his 1913 sculpture *Development of a Bottle in Space.* And then there is that famous statement about a galloping horse having not four legs but twenty and its movements' being triangular. The prospect of seeing Boccioni's beginnings and evolution, of having a context for the exploding bronze bottle and the horses, both painted and galloping, was promising.

Unfortunately, while the Metropolitan Museum's Boccioni retrospective was a model of careful research and conscientious presentation, it simply didn't make the heart leap up.[1] There were no real surprises, no unknown masterpieces among the hundred works on display. Knowing more about Boccioni's tragically short working life (he died in World War I at thirty-four) turned out to be not all that illuminating. You came out of the exhibition feeling virtuous but not altogether delighted.

The show's subtext—the career of an ambitious young provincial artist at a critical time in the development of modernism—proved more provocative than the individual works. Boccioni's Italianness, his being at one remove from the center of radical innovation in Paris, gave the show a special dimension and raised challenging questions about influence and context, about the relationship of Futurism to Cubism, about the significance of Futurism itself. It was, for example, instructive to see how unquestioning most of Boccioni's earliest work was. Before he met the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and joined with four other angry young painters (Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, and Gino Severini) to announce his allegiance to modernity and wholehearted rejection of the past, Boccioni was a rather timid and polite painter.

Born in 1882, Umberto Boccioni had a peripatetic upbringing, as his family followed his father, a minor government official, around an Italy that had been united only since 1870. At sixteen, Boccioni settled in Rome, then a provincial town of half a million, to take courses at a traditional life drawing school. By 1900, he had met Severini, also an aspiring art student, and soon after, Balla, slightly older and recently returned from Paris, full of enthusiasm for Impressionism. Balla's technicolor realism fascinated the young Boccioni. It was certainly an advance over what he had been

1 "Boccioni: A Retrospective" is on view at the Metroplitan Museum until January 8. The curator of the exhibition, Esther Coen, is also the author of the catalogue (Abrams, 272 pages, $39.95).

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learning and apparently over what was current in Italy, although the movement was anything but radical at the time. By the turn of the century, Impressionism was as international and pervasive as the Gothic style had been in the past, and trendiness is in our own time. Yet the freshness of Impressionism in the Italy of 1905 or so could be imagined, in the Boccioni exhibition, from the contrast between a group of sentimental, unadventurous portraits and a series of straightforward, pleasant landscapes, the latter attesting to Balla's influence.

Boccioni's first trip to Paris, in 1906, seems to have weakened his interest in Balla's approach and reinforced an interest in a more systematic way of using color to model form. In Boccioni's version of Divisionism, color, applied in ribbony strokes, runs through the full spectrum in virtually every picture, no matter what its subject. Yet in spite of the heating up of Boccioni's palette and the increasing stylization of his touch, the overwhelming impression produced by these early works is one not of daring but of conventional aspirations.

Boccioni's landscapes of these years, when he was in his twenties, are usually better than his figures, just as the views out of the windows behind his sitters are usually better than the portraits themselves. What is perhaps most striking is the rigidity and dryness of most of these early paintings. Their stiffness is all the more remarkable because his later works (and Futurism in general) derive from a powerful awareness of movement and flux. Futurist writings are full of allusions to "dynamism," to speed, motion, and the transient. Boccioni's heightened color even contributes to the rigidity of his early pictures. The opposed full spectrum colors —reds set against greens, purples against yellows, blues against oranges—are intended to create a luminous illusion of three-dimensional form; instead, they cancel each other out. Because there is so little relief from the predictable course around the color-wheel, the oppositions neutralize one another. Boccioni's repetitive touch, his carefully controlled wrist gesture, slows things down further, even when the repetitions blur details, so that the paintings become still more static.

A few industrial landscapes are exceptions. In views of the new outskirts of Milan, where Boccioni lived after leaving Rome, the paintings juxtapose factory buildings at the city's periphery with the flat Lombard plain. The factories, utilitarian and four-square as they are, prove more exciting than the landscape they interrupt and destroy. Like Monet's views of the Gare St. Lazare, Boccioni's factory views are tributes to technology that manage to extract optical poetry from machinery and the accoutrements of industrialization. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that Monet's images of railroad stations wreathed in light-diffusing steam were painted a good quarter century before Boccioni's romantic views of smoking factory chimneys. Nonetheless, the Boccioni canvases of 1909 are the first manifestations of a preoccupation with the hardware of modernity that would declare itself fully in his Futurist works.

The change came in 1910, after Boccioni met the poet Marinetti, a passionate advocate of the new. Just as, more than a generation earlier, Charles Baudelaire had urged Edouard Manet to paint "modern life" and thus profoundly influenced the iconography of Impressionism, Marinetti appears to have focused the energies and dissatisfactions of Boccioni and his friends and helped them to find a new direction. In February 1910, Boccioni, Balla, Carrà, Russolo, and Severini published the first *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters,* an irascible harangue addressed to "the young artists of Italy." It ends with a catalogue of what the signers hope to achieve with their "enthusiastic adherence to Futurism"; among other things, they wish "to destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with all things old, academic pedantry, and formalism"; "to exalt every form of originality, even if foolhardy, even if extremely violent"; and "to render and magnify the life of today, incessantly and tumultuously transformed by science triumphant."

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The last words: "Make way for the young, the violent, the headstrong!"

The manifesto was designed to shock and to attract attention. It was good showmanship, but the Futurists' protests were no less genuinely provoked by what they saw as the complacent, bourgeois society of turn-of-the-century Italy, a culture that prized good appearances and the values of the past. Like the primitivism of their German Expressionist contemporaries, the rage of the Futurists was a serious response to real repression.

In April, the first manifesto was followed by a *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting.* The first manifesto, the five signers declared, was largely concerned with "the relations between us and society"; the second proclamation is more purely aesthetic. (The passage about the galloping horse with the triangular movements comes from here.) "Everything is in movement," the manifesto states, "everything rushes forward, everything is in constant swift change. A figure is never stable in front of us but is incessantly appearing and disappearing."

But in Boccioni's case, what of the art that these attitudes produced? The works we know best often proved to be, in the context of the exhibition, the best works. *The City Rises,* enriched by many of its preparatory drawings, dominated the first Futurist room. The theme may be a self-consciously "modern" one—hard labor in the city as opposed to, say, shepherds in Arcadia—but, oddly, the painting reads almost as a romantic allegory disguised as a twentieth-century construction scene. The brute, animal power of the draughthorses is more visible than the half-finished buildings behind them. And there is something old-fashioned about the picture. Like the more radical *Simultaneous Visions,* painted a year later, in 1911, *The City Rises* exploits violent shifts in points of view and in the size of the elements depicted. This expansion and compression of space at the painter's will recalls the elastic space of sixteenth-century Italian Mannerism as much as it suggests the "dynamism" of the twentieth-century cityscape.

After visiting Paris again in 1911, with Severini as a guide, Boccioni seems to have absorbed some of the Cubists' innovations. His paintings became more adventurous; and there are drawings, some clearly indebted to Picasso's helpful example, others more independent minded, that would look at home in any Cubist exhibition. A little still life of 1912, from the Yale University Art Gallery, in gouache and pasted paper, is one of the handsomest and strongest works in the show, with its rich blues and bold red wineglass. Yet Boccioni nibbles at the edges of forms, rather than dissecting them entirely. The figures in his portraits stay more or less intact, their shoulders frayed into planes that merge with the ground, their hands rock-solid and geometric.

Paradoxically, Boccioni is bolder and often more successful as a sculptor. In *Development of a Bottle in Space,* he treats object and its surroundings with equal freedom, making space into forms as plastic as the bottle itself, and, at the same time, slicing the bottle, turning it inside out and translating it into planes that are interchangeable with those of the surrounding air. In the equally famous striding figure of 1913, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space,* the human body survives only as memory; its passage through space is made tangible as a series of fluid, shiny bronze planes, as though the air disturbed by the body's motion had been made solid and visible. Tantalizing photographs in the catalogue record plaster sculptures (now destroyed) that look as promising as anything that has survived.

In contrast to Boccioni's audacious sculpture, his paintings look evenhanded, broken into regular units and cautiously painted. How tame they look, for example, in relation to Matisse's revolutionary pictures of the same period: the still lifes, interiors, and portraits that redefine the world in terms of eloquent two-dimensional shapes and expanses of brilliant, thinly painted color. The tension between tenuous, expressive allusions to three-dimensional reality and the unequivocal fact of paint on the flat surface of the canvas in Matisse's paintings still looks startlingly new. In comparison, Boc-

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cioni continues to depict, using his tight, repetitive stroke, rendering imagined accumulations of planes as faithfully as he did his portrait subjects a few years earlier; his color remains arbitrary and a little sour.

Perhaps it is fairer to compare Boccioni to Picasso or Braque. Their work of the time also fragments subject matter and conflates a variety of points of view—near and far, top and bottom, side and full face—in defiance of conventional methods of alluding to form and space. The world becomes a flux of planes, in part, because the viewer's gaze is restless. Yet Boccioni's work seems to deal with issues other than the Cubists' dispassionate improvisations on perception. Futurism's fragmentation is more literal, often an equivalent for motion, like the overlapping images of cartoon convention. Futurism, according to one manifesto, proposed to put the viewer inside the center of the picture. The breakup of forms and spaces in Boccioni's paintings occurs because the world is in constant motion around the still spectator; fragmentation and color oppositions attempt to record the blur and slide of things as they go by. Cubism, on the other hand, depends upon assemblages of fixed, albeit disjunctive, perceptions.

Boccioni himself would probably have rejected any such comparison. In the second manifesto, the Futurists stated, "We declare that what passes under the name of Cubism is only a transitional tendency, and that our aspirations to a truly abstract painting are much more substantial." Boccioni denied any direct influence of Cubism, claiming to have "intuited" it all from Severini's descriptions.

It is difficult to speculate on how Boccioni's art might have developed. Perhaps he would have made more sculpture, had he lived longer. His last works, painted before he was called into active service in World War I, suggest a retreat from Futurism. With their subdued, limited palette and their broad modeling with colored planes, they owe more to Cézanne's example than anything that preceded them.

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition is a thorough, useful document with complete entries on each work and informative essays on such absorbing topics as the Futurists and their European contemporaries. All the manifesti and Boccioni's other writings are included. The reproductions are generally good, too. Many of Boccioni's paintings look better in reproduction than in actuality, perhaps because their color range becomes narrower, which unifies them, or because problems of scale and surface disappear. Some questions remain. It would be nice to know, for example, just what Boccioni saw on his early trips to Paris and on his trip to Russia in 1906, and a clear chronology would be helpful, but these may be the questions that Boccioni scholars are still trying to answer. The catalogue is full of wonderful photographs of the Futurists, Boccioni's studio, and other delights. They are dapper young men, some with carefully groomed mustaches; they sport stylish hats, astonishing lapels, and overcoats with velvet collars. Boccioni, with his slicked back hair and stiff collars, looks like something out of a Lucchino Visconti movie.

It's an interesting moment to look at Futurism. Something about the movement seems oddly contemporary. Like so much of what passes for serious painting and sculpture these days, Futurism's rhetoric is better than its imagery, its ideas better than its art. And like many of today's most successful young artists, the Futurists were adept at self-promotion. The outrageous manifesti galvanized attention and the horrified reviews that greeted their exhibitions in Italy and elsewhere in Europe simply helped to strengthen their notoriety. They missed an opportunity when they refused an invitation to exhibit in the 1913 Armory Show. (They were promised a room of their own, but they objected to the presence of the Cubists in the exhibition.) They realized their mistake and eagerly exhibited in the 1914 Panama Pacific International Exposition, but, as the catalogue points out, they were ignored. It seems ironic that the advocates of the new should have met so little enthusiasm on their first venture in the New World.

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The short happy life of Robert Louis Stevenson

by Joseph Epstein

"Talent without genius isn't much," remarked Valéry, "but genius without talent is nothing whatever." Robert Louis Stevenson had talent in abundance, and he was touched by genius, but how often the two combined in his work remains a question not easily answered. Stevenson (1850-1894) shall soon be dead for fully a century, yet his literary reputation is still unsettled. William Lyon Phelps thought that he belonged with Fielding and Scott, Dickens and George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy. Henry James acclaimed him "an exquisite literary talent." Yet George Moore, despite the enduring popularity of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped,* said that Stevenson "imagined no human soul, and he invented no story that anyone will remember," while John Jay Chapman accused him of merely aping his literary betters with the result that he was nothing more than "the most extraordinary mimic that has ever appeared in literature." Long moldering in his tomb atop Mount Vaea in Samoa, Stevenson himself may not feel the question of his literary reputation a very pressing one. But to those of us who have a minor mania (if not a full-blown rage) for order, and to whom Robert Louis Stevenson's career and accomplishments have long seemed as grey and cloudy as a February afternoon in his native city of Edinburgh, the attempt to place Stevenson has seemed long overdue. Besides, as a recent television commercial for America's leading gutter newspaper puts it, inquiring minds want to know.

Stevenson's was one of those large, flowing talents of the kind that always seem to leave lots of spillage in the form of unfinished books and finished books that probably ought never to have been begun. (He claimed to have made ten or twelve serious runs at writing a novel before completing his first, at age thirty-one, *Treasure Island.*) I mention the spillage only because Stevenson was working from a cracked glass to begin with, by which I mean that his health was wretched. From early childhood he suffered upper respiratory ailments—even today it is not completely certain that it was tuberculosis—that left him wracked by coughs and ruined by fevers; he grew up bone thin and slightly bug-eyed, perpetually susceptible to illness, disease, and every physical disaster. In Augustus Saint-Gaudens's memorial medallion of Stevenson, the subject is working, characteristically, in bed, a blanket over his propped up knees, a pad on his lap, a cigarette in hand. While Stevenson was still alive, Henry James, in an essay in the *Century Magazine,* did not scruple to remark that "it adds immensely to the interest of volumes through which there draws so strong a current of life to know that they are not only the work of an invalid, but have largely been written in bed, in dreary 'health resorts,' in the intervals of sharp attacks." In "Aes Triplex," one of Stevenson's best essays, he said, well knowing whereof he spoke, that the human body, viewed pathologically, is "a mere bag of petards." In the

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same essay, written when he was twenty-eight, Stevenson wrote that "it is better to lose health like a spendthrift than to waste it like a miser . . . better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sickroom." He himself died, after putting in a morning's writing, giving a French lesson to his step-grandchild, and helping his wife prepare a mayonnaise, in Samoa, of a cerebral hemorrhage, at the age of forty-four.

Stevenson loved life, and with an intensity perhaps granted only to those who are denied full participation in it. He took life not as a struggle but as an adventure. Although he might from time to time complain of one or another of his many maladies "unhorsing" him, he always rode on, viewing himself, in Walt Whitman's phrase, one of "freedom's athletes." A literary man to the tips of his long and emaciated fingers, he nonetheless despised all that he thought deadening in literary culture. He disliked realism of the kind made famous by Zola for its heavy emphasis on technique, and of it wrote: "Those who like death have their innings today with art that is like mahogany and horsehair furniture, solid, true, serious and dead as Caesar." A good part of his enthusiasm for Whitman was owing to the fact that the American poet struck "the brave, vivacious note," building courage in his readers and defeating indifference. Again and again the appetite for life, with its small but regular pleasures, comes through in Stevenson. Let theologians and philosophers argue whether life gives preparation for death or death gives meaning to life, as far as Stevenson was concerned, "a good meal and a bottle of wine is an answer to most standard works upon the question."

How explain this inexorably cheerful view of life on the part of a man whose early years supplied the perfect conditions to breed a prince of grievance and gloom? As a first datum, take the city of Edinburgh. In a brief essay on Edinburgh, the city of his birth and upbringing, Stevenson noted that "the weather is raw and boisterous in winter, shifty and ungenial in summer, and a downright meteorological purgatory in the spring." In Edinburgh, Stevenson adds, "the delicate die early, and I, as a survivor, among bleak winds and plumping rain, have been sometimes tempted to envy them their fate." To grow up in fragile health—and Stevenson's respiratory ailments were discovered when he was but two years old—in a city of tempests, lashing rain, and perpetual damp was an early indication that life's blessings are not evenly distributed at birth.

Stevenson's parents, in their odd differences of temperament, were themselves a mixed blessing. Owing to his mother's poor health—his illness is said to have been inherited from her—he was an only child in a house that sometimes took on the air of a sickroom. He probably also inherited his cheerful disposition from his mother, for she was intrepidly optimistic, to the point of sailing off to the South Seas with her son and his family when she was well along in life. His father offset his mother's jolly optimism with regular plunges into a deep melancholia that biographers tend to chalk up to the grim pessimism found at the heart of Calvinism. An engineer specializing in lighthouses, as his father before him had been, Thomas Stevenson was known for his work in optics as applied to lighthouse illumination. The Stevensons never bothered to patent any of their inventions; holding government appointments, they felt that in good conscience these patents were owed to the nation. But then conscience was ever of concern to Stevenson's father, whose sense of his own unworthiness his son called "morbid." Stevenson loved his father, and remarked upon his droll humor and the charm of his talk. When the small boy Louis, as Stevenson was called, would wake from one of his many nightmares, it was his father who would arrive to soothe him with tales of adventure of his own invention.

In later life Stevenson wrote plaintively to a friend that "the children of lovers are orphans." Certainly his parents loved each other, and his mother's illness—while he was a child she was nearly an invalid—may have diverted attention from himself. One of

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the chief effects of this was to throw Louis, like many another English or Scottish middle-class child, into the hands of a nurse-nanny; in his case into the hands of a woman named Alison Cunningham. "Cummy," as he called her, was very keen for religion, and kept her highly imaginative charge nicely revved up with fire-and-brimstone stories. "He was from a child an ardent and uncomfortable dreamer," Stevenson wrote of himself in an essay called "A Chapter on Dreams." His troubled dreams about losing salvation often combined with dreams about failure in school, so that in a standard nightmare, "he seemed to himself to stand before the Great White Throne; he was called on, poor little devil, to recite some form of words, on which his destiny depended; his tongue stuck, his memory was blank, hell gaped for him; and he would awake, clinging to the curtain-rod with his knees to his chin."

Yet the picture I seem to be limning of a sickly child with a febrile imagination set aflame by religious fantasies, a boy so crushable that he therefore must easily be crushed, is a distortion. He may have been ill but he wasn't unhappy; his illness merely forced him to live more in his mind than other children, devising games to be played upon the counterpane, inventing stories to pass the secluded days. The future author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* was already working at his apprenticeship. He had powerful inner resources—and powerful outer ones, too. Boy and man, Robert Louis Stevenson was one tough and willful hombre. So far as one can make out, he never finally did anything in life that he really didn't want to do.

No weakling could have defied his father, as Stevenson did, on the two things in life that were most important to him: religion and work. As he grew older, Stevenson began to feel more acutely the chill of Scottish Calvinism. The deadliness of Edinburgh sabbaths with their pervasive restrictions seemed pointless to him and the emphasis on sin, as construed in his father's home and church, only made sin itself more enticing. As a young man, Stevenson, partly out of a distaste for polite Edinburgh society, began to develop a taste for bohemianism and low life. He ran with his cousin Bob Stevenson, three years his elder, who is said to have taught him, in the words of the editor W. E. Henley, to "think and drink." Out of a mixture of curiosity and desire, he had a go at the brothels of Victorian Edinburgh. With his cousin and a few selected cronies, he hung around the shadier pubs in the city's slummier neighborhoods, where his companions, as he later noted, were "seamen, chimney-sweeps, and thieves." "My circle," he added, "was being continually changed by the action of the police magistrate."

In a fit of foolish candor when he was twenty-two, Stevenson proclaimed to his father that he was agnostic. "You have rendered my whole life a failure," Thomas Stevenson replied. Life at home afterward was dour; Stevenson likened it to "a house in which somebody is awaiting burial." In one of their several arguments about religion, Stevenson's father shot out at him: "A poor end for all my tenderness. I have worked for you and gone out of my way for you and the end of it is that I find you in opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ—I find everything gone." Loving his father, Stevenson did not find this easy to take. (Good old guilt, the gift that never stops giving.) Yet he stood his ground, muting his opinions when not absolutely swallowing them, in later life abiding quietly by his father's religious rules when in his company, so that in time religion no longer stood, bog-like, between them.

It was assumed that Stevenson would follow the profession of his grandfather, his father, and his uncles—that of lighthouse engineer. At the University of Edinburgh he studied for a scientific degree. When only twenty he wrote and read a paper entitled "A New Form of Intermittent Light" before the Royal Scottish Society of Arts. Doubtless he could have succeeded well enough as an engineer, yet, as he made plain in his essay "The Education of an Engineer," the work, for all its satisfactions, was not for him:

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"It takes a man into the open air; it keeps him hanging about harbour-sides, which is the richest form of idling; it carries him to wild islands; it gives him a taste of the genial dangers of the sea; it supplies him with dexterities to exercise; it makes demands upon his ingenuity; it will cure him of any taste (if ever he had one) for the miserable life of cities." All well enough, but "when it has done so, it carries him back and shuts him in an office!" Stevenson briefly describes the drudgeries of the inside-work aspects of engineering—applying "long-sighted eyes to the petty niceties of drawing" and so forth. Yet there is something a bit disingenuous about it all, for long before he had determined to be a writer. When he apprised his father of this, Thomas Stevenson took the decision with calm resignation, asking only that his son now study law so that, should the always precarious trade of literature not provide a steady income, he would have something to fall back upon. (With their use of parental guilt and of law school as a fall-back position, these Scottish Calvinists begin to sound more and more like the Jews of nineteenth-century Protestantism.) Stevenson did in fact study law, though less than passionately, and even passed the bar, though he never practiced.

Robert Louis Stevenson went from a childhood of inventing stories in his head to an adolescence of scribbling away at them in earnest. An indifferent student, he served a most serious novitiate in literature. Janet Adam Smith, in her slender volume on Stevenson in the Duckworth Great Lives series, writes of him at university: "His real work, he considered, was to learn how to write. As he walked about Edinburgh and the Pentlands he was always trying to find the right words for what he saw, and jotting them down in a notebook. Whenever he read something that seemed particularly well or neatly said, he sat down and imitated the author." Careful words set out in a confident cadence were his aim, and if he did not instantly achieve it on the page he apparently could unfailingly bring it off in conversation. The wife of an Edinburgh engineering professor described the youthful Stevenson as this boy "who talked as Charles Lamb wrote, this young Heine with the Scottish accent." Sidney Colvin, Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge, who first met him when Stevenson was twenty-two, has left the following account of the charms of his conversation:

> He would begin no matter how—perhaps with a jest at some absurd adventure of his own, perhaps with the recitation, in his vibrating voice and full of Scotch accent, of some snatch of poetry that was haunting him, perhaps with a rhapsody of analytic delight over some minute accident of beauty or expressiveness that had struck him in man, woman, child, or external nature. And forthwith the floodgates would be opened, and the talk would stream on in endless, never importunate, flood and variety. A hundred fictitious characters would be invented and launched on their imaginary careers; a hundred ingenious problems of conduct and cases of honor would be set and solved; romantic voyages would be planned and followed out in vision, with a thousand incidents; the possibilities of life and art would be illuminated with searchlights of bewildering range and penetration, sober argument and high poetic eloquence alternating with coruscations of insanely apposite slang . . . and all the while an atmosphere of goodwill diffusing itself from the speaker, a glow of eager benignity and affectionate laughter emanating from his presence, till every one about him seemed to catch something of his gift and inspiration. This sympathetic power of inspiring others was the special and distinguishing note of Stevenson's conversation.

Stevenson's clothes did not attract less attention than his conversation. He dressed out of the let-'er-rip school of haberdashery, partly owing to the fact that his father kept him on a short financial leash. He might wear a red sash round his waist, an odd colorful piece of cloth at his throat, a rumpled velveteen jacket, a shawl across his thin shoulders, some strange piece of head-

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gear. He wore his hair long and none too clean, a thick and somewhat droopy mustache depended from his upper lip, a wispy imperial from his lower. He was 5'10" but his thinness, owing to his endless illnesses, made him seem well above six feet, at least in photographs and paintings. In John Singer Sargent's famous portrait, Stevenson has the elongated look that certain funhouse mirrors give, though all who knew him averred that Sargent's is a fine likeness. I tend to think of him, physically, as a disheveled version of Comte Robert de Montesquieu, Proust's model for Baron de Charlus, dressed out of a Goodwill shop.

This freakishly dressed, splendidly well-spoken young man did not take long to capture the attention and affection of his elders. In London in 1874, when Stevenson was twenty-three, Sidney Colvin put him up for the Savile Club, formed five years earlier and known as the preferred meeting place of the young and brilliant and promising. There his dazzling talk impressed, among others, Edmund Gosse, himself now launched on a literary career (Gosse was five years older than Stevenson). Soon Stevenson's essays and reviews began appearing in the *Fortnightly,* the *Academy,* and Leslie Stephen's *Cornhill,* where for a while his contributions, signed R. L. S., were thought to stand for the Real Leslie Stephen.

Although Stevenson was from the outset an immensely productive writer, he disavowed literary fertility, claiming "I am constipated in the brains." He appears to have been one of those essentially slothful and disorganized people who turn out a vast quantity of work as part of the general effort to avoid doing that work that they are supposed to be doing in the first place. Some people before they begin writing need near perfect conditions: good health, psychological security, Trappist monastery quiet, two grants, and a gentle climate. Others can write with creditors' knuckles at the door, on choppy seas, while hemorrhaging. Robert Louis Stevenson was of the latter kind. He was a natural writer, not that writing came easily to him—there are, as someone once said, no Mozarts in literature—but that he loved fashioning phrases, constructing sentences, building paragraphs. "No other business offers a man his daily bread upon such joyful terms," he wrote about writing in "Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art," and then he adds:

> I take the author, with whose career I am best acquainted, and it is true he works in a rebellious material, and that the act of writing is cramped and trying both to the eyes and the temper; but remark him in his study, when matter crowds upon him and words are not wanting—in what a continual series of small successes time flows by; with what a sense of power as of one moving mountains, he marshals his petty characters; with what pleasures, both of the ear and eye, he sees his airy structure growing on the page; and how he labours in a craft to which the whole material of his life is tributary, and which opens a door to all his tastes, his loves, his hatreds, and his convictions, so that what he writes is only what he longed to utter.

No matter how complicated Stevenson's life, in the midst of the complexity he generally emerges, manuscript in hand, without complaint. "There should be no honours for the artist," he wrote in the same essay; "he has already, in the practice of his art, more than his share of the rewards of life; the honours are pre-empted for other trades, less agreeable and perhaps more useful."

As for complications, Stevenson added richly to his own when, at twenty-six, he fell in love with a woman some ten years older than he who was already married, with a seventeen-year-old daughter, an eight-year-old son, and a recently deceased infant over whom she was still grieving. A more convenient lover, one might have thought, must have been available; still, "the blind bowboy," as Stevenson referred to Cupid, had struck. Fanny Osbourne was an American, Indianapolis born, small, dark, game, a bit of a bluestocking, even more (in the words of J. C. Furnas, Stevenson's biographer), an "aesthetic *parvenu.*" Without much in the

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way of funds, and perhaps even less in talent, she had come to Europe to study painting. Stevenson met her at Grez, a village and art colony near Fontainebleau, where he had gone for his health, she for her painting. To make a lengthy romance short, once Fanny was able to clear the decks of her first husband through divorce, she and Stevenson married. He was then twenty-nine, in ill health, and unable to earn a living for one. "And yet when all has been said," as he wrote in part two of his essay "Virginibus Puerisque," "the man who should hold back from marriage is in the same case with him who runs away from battle." Not quite the way a contemporary marriage counselor might put it, perhaps, but it captures nicely its author's sense of life as an adventure.

Young men who marry women who already have children are the world's supreme optimists. Stevenson is of their class, and perhaps beyond. When he followed Fanny Osbourne across the ocean and thence across the continent to Monterey, California, he had neither health nor the least prospect of wealth. "I am an author," he wrote to a future brother-in-law, "but I am not very likely to make my fortune in that business, where better even than I are glad to get their daily bread." It was quite a bargain: he was acquiring as a wife a woman who had been round the block a time or two and who was scarcely ten years younger than his mother, while she was acquiring, as J. C. Furnas puts it in his excellent biography, "a rickety economic casualty."[1] On Stevenson's side, all were united in their opposition to the marriage. His literary friends in London tried systematically to discourage him; his father in Edinburgh threatened to disinherit him. Stevenson, working away in a furnished room in San Francisco on five or six different economically unpromising literary projects and suffering from malaria and rotting teeth, was not to be dissuaded from his course. One recalls that the elder and wilder of the two Duries brothers in Stevenson's novel *The Master of Ballantrae* flips a coin whenever a fateful decision is required. Stevenson had something of the same willingness to leave his fate to chance. He married Fanny Osbourne in San Francisco on May 19, 1880.

Fourteen years of life were left to Robert Louis Stevenson. These were spent in an atmosphere of domestic chaos that might have driven a less spirited and more serenity-seeking man to slip away on a moonless night to join the Foreign Legion. Until the final move to Samoa in 1890, the Stevensons changed residences—usually for reasons of health or for journalistic opportunity—from California to Scotland to Switzerland to France to England to upper New York State to Honolulu to the South Seas. The cast of characters hauled along on this odyssey included stepchildren and a grandchild, a spendthrift and shiftless stepson-in-law, a somewhat intemperate Skye terrier named Bogue, a cat that could not be housebroken, a French-Swiss maid of the type that used to be known as "a treasure," various Polynesian servants, and at one point a Chinese chef with the hilarious name of Ah Fu. Sciatica, Egyptian ophthalmia, and severe hemorrhages were but a few of the afflictions suffered by the head of this travelling circus; death, which could never have been far from his thoughts during his many bouts of illness, he described as "the wolverine on my shoulders." All this while he plowed and plugged away at a gallimaufry of projects: novels, stories, essays, journalism, finishing more than anyone might think possible, leaving some uncompleted, walking away from others (among the latter, a biography of William Hazlitt, which is a volume in that most portable of libraries: books one would love to have read but for the inconvenient fact that they were never written).

As long as you're up, a contemporary who reads about Stevenson's travail feels like exclaiming, get this man a grant—make it a double MacArthur. In fact, despite his impressive rate of literary production, Ste-

1 J. C. Furnas's *Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* was published by William Sloane Associates in 1951.

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venson, given the expenses caused by his illnesses and by his familial responsibilities, could not make his nut. He was able to keep afloat only through help from his father, who was at first strongly opposed to his son's marriage but soon enough kicked in for £250 a year, and extra when more was needed. Quarrel though they might, Stevenson must have known that he could always count upon his father, and often did, and his father never failed him.

The book that finally put Robert Louis Stevenson into the black was *Treasure Island,* which began as a lark when Stevenson, amusing himself with his stepson Lloyd's paints, drew a treasure map of an imaginary island. He next constructed a story to go with the map, which he wrote at the rate of a chapter a day and read each night to his family, then living near Braemar in Scotland. Both Stevenson's father and his stepson enjoyed it immensely and added bits of detail that he inserted into the text. The story originally appeared, under a pseudonym, in a boy's magazine called *Young Folks.* "If this doesn't fetch the kids," remarked Stevenson, "why, they have gone rotten since my day." The original title for the story was "The Sea-Cook," after its most interesting character, Long John Silver, who, it will be recalled, served as a cook on the *Hispaniola,* the ship in the novel. In its book form the title was changed to *Treasure Island,* which naturally seems much the superior title. But then, as the small store of publishing wisdom has it, the winning title for a best-selling book is that which happens to have been given to a book that sells extremely well.

Treasure Island was not, as J.C. Furnas recounts, a smashing best-seller, but instead a book that slowly built its audience until it became part of that small shelf of books that every middle-class English-speaking boy is supposed to read. Its early admirers, however, were quite as often adults as children; Gladstone is said to have stayed up through an entire night reading it; the critic Andrew Lang pronounced it, as a romance, beneath only the *Odyssey* and *Tom Sawyer.* Its author originally received (at *Young Folks*'s space rates) roughly thirty-four pounds for its serialization and a hundred for its publication in book form. Slowly but inexorably reprint followed reprint. "In his lifetime," writes James Pope-Hennessey in his 1974 biography of Stevenson, "it was appearing in [editions of] tens of thousands. Louis had his first taste of fame."[2]

With the publication of *Treasure Island* in 1883, just after Stevenson's thirty-third birthday, he began slowly to turn from being a small-public to a large-public writer, from being a "detrimental" (as he put it in his essay "Authors and Publishers") to a successful author. When *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* appeared in 1886, it sold forty thousand copies in its first six months and had three separate dramatizations for the stage. *Kidnapped* (1886), like *Treasure Island,* became a steady earner of royalties. Offers of work for serious fees began arriving from America: $10,000 to write a weekly column for the New York *World,* $3,500 to write a year's worth of monthly essays for *Scribner's Magazine.* "The good fairy," writes J. C. Furnas, "was dipping in with both hands." Stevenson became one of nine members elected annually to the Atheneum Club in London. And he had gained entrance into an even more select club—that of the small circle of intimate friends of Henry James.

The friendship of Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson was founded on their passionate interest in the art of fiction and their respect for each other as very different practitioners of that art; and it was perpetuated by the love that sturdily grew between them. The friendship began when, in 1884, Stevenson published in *Longman's Magazine* "A Humble Remonstrance" to James's essay "The Art of Fiction," published earlier in the same journal. Stevenson's remonstrance, written with evident and great regard for James, sets out the case for his own kind of fiction, and does so with

2 Pope-Hennessey's *Robert Louis Stevenson* was published by Jonathan Cape.

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a subtlety of tact, a measured elegance of style, and a depth of knowledge that Henry James found irresistible. He didn't, in fact, try to resist it, and directly wrote to Stevenson to say that they had more belief in common than he perhaps knew and that "it's a luxury, in this immoral age, to encounter some one who *does* write—who is really acquainted with that lovely art."

In *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, A Record of Friendship and Criticism* (1948), Janet Adam Smith writes: "James and Stevenson clearly loved each other; but they also needed each other." When they met, James was forty-one, Stevenson thirty-four. Yet, as Mrs. Smith goes on to say, both of them "thought more profoundly about their art, and cared more intensely for it, than any of their contemporaries"; both had a strong sense of the sacredness of their craft and of its demands; and both felt something many notches below awe for the opinion of the public on literary quality, with Stevenson at one point allowing, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, that "there must be something wrong in me, or I would not be popular." As Mrs. Smith rightly remarks, "they certainly were the two most conscious novelists of their time in England."

Although James had met Stevenson earlier, and was not much impressed with his bohemianism, thinking him a bit of a *poseur,* they first became friends in Bournemouth, where Stevenson was on the mend from yet another of his illnesses and James was attending his invalid sister Alice. Intimacy between them appears to have been almost instant. Fanny Stevenson wrote to her mother about James: "I had always been told that he was the type of an Englishman, but, except that he looks like the Prince of Wales, I call him the type of an American. He is gentle, amiable and soothing." Apparently sufficiently so for Stevenson soon to speak and write to him with full candor about his art. After telling James how much pleasure he took from reading *Roderick Hudson,* he was not above recommending that, if a new edition were to be run off, James might go through the text and strike out the words "immense" and "tremendous," which he thought overused. In the same letter, in a postscript, he informed James that "I can't bear *The Portrait of a Lady.*" He cheered James on during the composition of *The Princess Casamassima,* congratulating him on his being able to "do low life," adding that "it was of that nature of touch that I sometimes achingly miss from your former work."

Although of the two men James was aesthetically much the more highly developed, the most he allowed himself by way of criticism of Stevenson's work in their correspondence was to remark that his verses "show your 'cleverness,' but they don't show your genius," and to complain, ever so mutedly, about missing the "*visible*," "the *personal* painter-touch" in Stevenson's book *The South Seas* and in his novel *Catriona.* James understood Stevenson better than Stevenson understood James, but then James understood him better than any of his other friends of longer standing. He was the only one among them not to oppose Stevenson's final settlement in Samoa, though he was to miss him sorely. James realized that, if Stevenson continued to live in Europe, he would have to continue to abide in one or another health spa, or, as Stevenson himself once put it, in the "Land of the Counterpane," where his life approximated that of "a weevil in a biscuit." Writing about Stevenson after his death, James noted that in Samoa "he found, after a wonderful, adventurous quest, the treasure island, the climatic paradise that met, that enhanced his possibilities; and with this discovery was ushered in his completely full and rich period, the time in which . . . his genius and his character most overflowed."

"Unexpurgated heaven" Stevenson called the climate in Samoa, which for him it was since it gave him back his health at forty, or at least more of it than he was able to enjoy in many years. Fanny and he and their complicated family had plenty in the way of details to keep them jumping when Stevenson bought the Vailima estate near the municipality of Apia and set out to build a

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cluster of houses for his family and servants and a large manse-like structure for family meetings. The Samoans called him Tusitala, which means teller of tales, and his relations with those Samoans he encountered were splendid, chiefly because he never lorded it over them and had an instinctive appreciation for their ways that Franz Boas would have found admirable. As he wrote to a friend from Bournemouth who was about to begin missionary work:

> Forget wholly and for ever all small pruderies, and remember that you cannot change ancestral feelings of right and wrong without what is practically soul murder. Barbarous as the customs may seem, always hear them with patience, always judge them with gentleness, always find in them some seed of good; see that you always develop them; remember that all you can do is to civilize the man in the line of his own civilization, such as it is.

Sound advice, and Henry Adams, while touring the South Pacific with his friend the painter John La Farge, might have done well to have taken it when visiting the Stevensons. Adams encountered them shortly after they had themselves arrived at Vailima, and his reaction to them was pure snobbery. The squalor of the setting hit him first, and then their garb bowled him over. "Imagine a man so thin and emaciated that he looked like a bundle of sticks in a bag, with a head and eyes morbidly intelligent and restless," Adams wrote to his friend Elizabeth Cameron. "He was costumed in a dirty striped cotton pyjamas, the baggy legs tucked into coarse knit woolen stockings, one of which was bright brown in color, the other a purplish dark tone." When Adams, the past century's least casual man, could get his mind off those socks, which wasn't easy, he described Stevenson's nervous manner of talk, "for he cannot be quiet, but sits down, jumps up, darts off and flies back, at every sentence he utters, and his eyes and features gleam with a hectic glow." On another occasion, after admonishing himself that in his correspondence he must stop ridiculing Stevenson, who had been most obliging in arranging letters of recommendation for him in the South Pacific, Adams describes him as looking "like an insane stork" and Fanny, whom he had earlier likened to "a half-breed Mexican," as being as "stalwart as any other Apache squaw." Snobbery has perhaps never more completely negated intelligence.

Robert Louis Stevenson did not get his wish of dying a violent death ("to be drowned, to be shot, to be thrown from a horse—aye, to be hanged"), but at least he evaded, through cerebral hemorrhage, the death through "slow dissolution" that he feared most. His funeral was a Cecil B. De Mille production. Forty Samoan tribal chiefs, working through the night, with knives and axes cut a path up the steep incline of Mount Vaea, at whose summit he wished to be buried. The following day his body in its coffin was carried up the path on Samoan shoulders to be buried in a grave from which the Pacific Ocean could be viewed 1,300 feet below. Fanny Stevenson lived twenty years longer, and died in California, though her daughter buried her ashes in her husband's grave atop Mount Vaea.

What was not buried on Mount Vaea was the legend—or, as it is more often called, the myth—of Robert Louis Stevenson, which began in earnest with Stevenson's death. George Saintsbury called him "the most brilliant and interesting by far" of the English writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. "Vergil of prose," chipped in Richard Le Gallienne. "He was the laureate of the joy of life," wrote a contributor to the *Atheneum*. Arthur Conan Doyle set him alongside Poe and Hawthorne as one of the three great short-story writers. Arthur Quiller-Couch weighed in with: "Put away books and paper and pen . . . . Stevenson is dead, and now there is nobody left to write for." Interest in the facts of Stevenson's life was unending; not since Byron had biographical curiosity about a writer run quite so high. "Within thirty years every living human being whose cat had patronized the same veterinarian as Bogue [the Stevensons' Skye

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terrier] had published dilute memories of Robert Louis Stevenson," J. C. Furnas writes in his biography. "In short," as Chesterton remarked in his 1927 study of Stevenson, the entire fuss was "overdone; it was too noisy and yet all on one note; above all, it was too incessant and too prolonged."

And yet it could scarcely be resisted. The profusely talented young writer whose flame lights the sky, then gutters, and is snuffed out is a story with repeated and, apparently, endless appeal. It is the story of the god Adonis, young and beautiful and too soon dead. It is the story, in literature, of Keats and Byron and Rupert Brooke and, in America, of F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Agee. The story is generally made more piquant when the young writer leaves behind an unfinished masterpiece, as Fitzgerald left behind *The Last Tycoon* and Agee *A Death in the Family.* Stevenson left behind a novel, said to be a third complete, entitled *Weir of Hermiston,* and it is frustratingly fine. He also left behind a reputation, doubtless much overdone, as a saintly man. "He became the most exquisite English writer of his generation," wrote Edmund Gosse, "yet those who lived close to him are apt to think less of this than of the fact that he was the most unselfish and lovable of human beings." Gosse also wrote: "I ought to remember [Stevenson's] faults, but I protest I can remember none."

After such inflation, it did not take the deflators long to arrive. Sniffing around in Stevenson's private life, literary journalists and scholars tried snouting out various truffles of scandal: love affairs, illegitimate children, bigamy (on Fanny's part) were set upon the table. The critical reaction soon enough set in. George Moore, John Jay Chapman, Thomas Beer wrote that Stevenson was vastly overrated; E. F. Benson, C. E. M. Joad, Frank Swinnerton argued that he was no more than second-rate. For Swinnerton "the extravagant nonsense written and thought about Stevenson since his death" only impaired his literary reputation, making it all the plainer that "with all his writing he took the road of least resistance, the road of limited horizons . . . ." Swinnerton could find no more in Stevenson than "a fragment, a handful of tales and two boys books . . . and the charm of Stevenson's personality." As for charm, Swinnerton added: "Charm as an adjunct is very well; charm as an asset is of less significance." When the deflators depart, they don't leave much.

Not that Stevenson hadn't doubts about his own literary quality—doubts that even the most patent evidence of worldly success could not shake. This evidence came in the form of a large and steady sale of his books, admiring letters from famous as well as younger writers that made plain his world fame, and plans on the part of his English and American publishers to bring out a collected, twenty-volume Edinburgh Edition of his writings—this last rather impressive for a man still in his early forties. Yet he continued to think of himself as merely the "author of a vast quantity of little books." He told his stepson Lloyd that "what genius I had was for hard work," and, in a letter to Sidney Colvin, remarked, "I cannot take myself seriously, as an artist; the limitations are so obvious."

Are they? A final judgment about Robert Louis Stevenson's quality is not so easily made. Given all that he had to overcome to achieve what he did, there is simply no setting aside his life—as Henry James rightly noted after Stevenson's death, it had been his fortune to become, like Samuel Johnson, a "Figure." In *Treasure Island* and (to a lesser extent) *Kidnapped,* he produced two authentic children's classics; and in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* with its central insight into the duality of human personality, he placed a psychological metaphor permanently into the language in a story that continues to interest new generations of intelligent readers, while keeping academics happily whittling away at their workbenches.[3] Stevenson was the literary

3 A recent sampling of this handiwork is to be found in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde after One Hundred Years,* edited by William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch; University of Chicago Press, 332 pages, $47.50.

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equivalent of the decathlon athlete: competing in ten different difficult events yet holding world records in none. He wrote essays, novels, children's verse, political journalism, boys' books, poetry, plays, short stories, mysteries, and memoirs—almost all of it interesting, some of it touching greatness, yet very little wholly, shimmeringly splendid and powerful in the way one requires of the highest art.

Along with his extraordinary variousness, there is the problem of Stevenson's style. Often, when complimented on a piece of work, he would attribute what success he had achieved in it to this or that "trick" of style. He worked very hard on his prose. It is not going too far to say that he was a brilliant stylist; it is going altogether too far, however, to say that he had his own style. He had instead *styles.* When Stevenson set out to tell a story, he searched for the best style in which to tell it. Sometimes, as in *The Master of Ballantrae* and in *Treasure Island,* he would switch styles by switching narrators in mid-book and then switch back again. Sometimes he would appropriate another writer's style—as he did, without happy effect, George Meredith's in his, Stevenson's, novel *Prince Otto.* Even his essays, familiar, personal, and marvelously good though many of them are, do not have a distinctive and unified style; they, too, lack an original feel and could have been written by several other Victorian men of letters.

The music critic Ernest Newman used to maintain that all important composers, when studied carefully, leave fingerprints that reveal what he called the "physiology of their style," which was itself the basis for their psychology. Anyone who reads large amounts of a particular writer comes in time to discover similar literary fingerprints—sentences or passages that one greets by recognizing that this is the author in his most essential self, pure Jane Austen or Tolstoy or Dickens or George Eliot or Conrad or James or Chekhov or Kafka; it could only have been written by him or her and by no one else. Stevenson's books are filled with wondrous passages, rhythmic and ringing and resonant with penetrating observation and felicitous sentiment—and yet they are not characteristically his but beautiful writing merely. A writer who took great pains with prose style, he finally left no fingerprints of his own.

Henry James, who wrote about Stevenson with the sympathy of a good-hearted friend, remarked in an essay of 1887 that "each of his books is an independent effort—a window opened to a different view." James noted Stevenson's love of style, and, in a fine touch of merry malice, late in his essay wrote that Stevenson's "ideal of the delightful work of fiction would be the adventures of Monte Cristo related by the author of *Richard Feverel.*" But if James found no characteristic style in Stevenson, he did find a characteristic note, which was the love of life and especially of life lived by the young. "The part of life that he cares for most is youth, and the direct expression of the love of youth is the beginning and end of his message . . . . In a word, he is an artist accomplished even to sophistication, whose constant theme is the unsophisticated."

Toward the close of his essay, James remarks on the quarrel in *Kidnapped* between the novel's two heroes, David Balfour and Alan Breck, a quarrel that comes about, it will be recalled, almost as much through fatigue as through anything else. James found an impressively deep psychological truth in this brief scene, finding in it "a real stroke of genius, [that has in it] the very logic and rhythm of life—a quarrel which we feel to be inevitable, though it is about nothing, or almost nothing, and which springs from exasperated nerves and the simple shock of temperaments." It was in search of such artistic touches that James read, and he has taught others of us to be on the lookout for them. James ends his essay by saying that such a fine touch is Stevenson's pledge of future artistry of the highest and finest caliber.

Yet Stevenson, finally, was less interested in such touches than in getting the swords out again, moving the action along, telling

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his story without too much fuss and bother. G. K. Chesterton, who (like James) wanted to have a high opinion of Stevenson and who wrote about him in the wake of Stevenson's detractors, noted that Stevenson was altogether too economical in his storytelling, and felt that he would have profited by availing himself of more Victorian capaciousness: "It is exactly because Balfour or Ballantrae only do what they are meant to do, and do it so swiftly and well, that we have a vague feeling that we do not know them as we know more loitering, more rambling or more sprawling characters." Stevenson's problem, I understand Chesterton to be saying, is that he too carefully observed what he, Chesterton, called "the niceties of technical literature," by which he meant that Stevenson was too much the professional writer and did not let himself go in the direction of Whitman, the Victorian novelists, Henry James, and all true artists—the direction, that is to say, of one's own artistic instincts and idiosyncrasies.

Stevenson had the talent to write stories like "The Beach of Falesá" and "The Suicide Club" that are almost as good as anything in Conrad and Kipling, and essays like "The Lantern-Bearers" and "Aes Triplex" that are almost as good as anything in Hazlitt and Lamb, but not quite the genius to be absolutely himself on the page. Had he possessed that genius, he might have surpassed them all. If literature, as Van Wyck Brooks once defined it, is a great man writing, the best place to discover the great man who was Robert Louis Stevenson is in his letters. There one can depend upon finding adversity met by unrelenting cheerfulness, misfortune by undiminished courage. ("Literally no man has more completely lived out life than I have done," he wrote in the last year of his life to his friend Charles Baxter. "And still it's good fun.") It is a magnificent human performance, and puts one in mind of a sentence in Stevenson's youthful essay on John Knox, in which he compares the difficulty of Knox's early life to the serenity of his later life. "One would take the first forty years gladly," Stevenson wrote at twenty-four, "if one could be sure of the last thirty." The man who wrote that sentence had forty-four years in all, and within them, against formidable obstacles, achieved a very great deal. With another thirty years to live, what might he have done? That, alas, is another of those questions too sad to pursue.

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Furtwängler on trial
by Dana Mack

For those Germans who lived in the vain hope that the Nazi assault on high culture could be checked, the Hindemith Affair of 1934-35 was ominous. It all began in the spring of 1934 when the regime banned the premiere of Paul Hindemith's opera *Mathis der Maler.* The decision was sudden, and of course dispiriting, but the reasons for it were anything but obscure. The opera's theme—the renunciation of political engagement in favor of an all-consuming devotion to art—could hardly have been expected to delight the Nazis; and the opera's book-burning scene carried the most obvious implications. Then there was the Führer's personal feelings of revulsion toward Hindemith, owing to a scene from the composer's 1929 revue, *Neues vom Tage,* in which a lady appeared in a bubble bath. Finally, there was the composer's past: as a member of the Amar Quartet and an eclectic experimenter in directions ranging from jazz to atonal expressionism, Hindemith had acquired some Jewish "associations."

Perhaps no person inside or outside the Party took the fate of Hindemith's opera more to heart than the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954). As director of the Berlin *Staatsoper* he had been the one to accept *Mathis* for performance, and now he defiantly stood by his judgment. No sooner had Göring announced the ban than Furtwängler arranged a performance of the *Mathis* Symphony (drawn from the opera) with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, of which he also served as director. As expected, the work was received enthusiastically and written about in the international press. Furtwängler appealed for removal of the ban, but to no avail. Disappointed and angry, he decided to force a confrontation on the matter.

More was at stake here than Furtwängler's control of the *Staatsoper.* Furtwängler was an important symbol of Germany's musical culture and generally acknowledged to be a great interpreter of the German symphonic tradition; he clearly saw the composer Hindemith as the rightful heir to that tradition. What is more, Furtwängler held the rather exalted position of vice-president of the *Reichsmusikkammer,* the agency of Joseph Goebbels's propaganda ministry that dealt with music policy. Naturally, he assumed the right to dissent on certain policy decisions—especially when they might cause irreparable damage to Germany's cultural prestige.

This was not the first time Furtwängler had raised his voice in protest. In a letter to Goebbels of April 7, 1933, Furtwängler had objected to the summary dismissal of Jewish artists from Germany's educational and cultural institutions—and his letter had had some effect: it provoked a public dialogue with Goebbels and even stimulated a surreptitious arrangement by which indispensable Jewish musicians were retained by the Philharmonic.

So it was not without hope of success that the conductor went about the task of con-

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structing a public defense of Hindemith. His article of protest, published in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* of November 25, 1934, was clothed in the terminology of the regime:

> In certain circles a campaign has been launched against Paul Hindemith . . . . Why is he reproached? Regarding purely political matters, because he has close relations with Jews . . . [and] has made concert recordings with two Jewish émigrés even after the National Socialist Revolution. But here we are speaking of a . . . long established string trio . . . whose other members are hardly "emigrants"; rather, they are the prominent concert-master of the Berlin Philharmonic, [Simon] Goldberg, who only recently left the orchestra to dedicate himself to a solo career, and the Austrian [Emanuel] Feuermann, an eminent teacher for many years at the State Conservatory of Music and acknowledged as one of Europe's finest cellists. Moreover, these recordings were made in fulfillment of an old contract.

As to Hindemith's aestheticist tendencies, he granted that the texts of certain works were "questionable," but these were early works, he wrote, and the composer should not be punished for the "sins of his youth." Finally, he offered an appeal on behalf of art:

> Where would we get if political denunciation was applied in such wide measure against art? . . . We must be clear about one thing. In light of the world's indescribable poverty where truly productive musicians are concerned, we cannot afford to dispense with such a man as Hindemith.

Upon the publication of this protest, Furtwängler let it be known that if the Hindemith Affair was not to be resolved to his satisfaction, he would resign from his official posts.

Furtwängler could hardly have foreseen the passion his open protest unleashed. On the morning of the twenty-fifth, crowds gathered in front of the hall where the Philharmonic was to hold an open rehearsal. The ovation which greeted him lasted twenty minutes. And the tumult which followed his performance of *Tristan und Isolde* that evening at the *Staatsoper,* in the presence of Goebbels and Göring, lasted no less than forty. In short, it was a demonstration of resistance—a revolution in the concert hall —and one the regime could not ignore.

Within days, Furtwängler's resignations were accepted. Stripped of official duties, conducting engagements, and even, temporarily, his passport, he retreated from public view. For three months he was allowed to stew. Meanwhile, ticket sales for the Philharmonic plummeted and subscriptions were returned *en masse.* Musicians from all over the world offered the conductor their moral support and congratulations —and watched apprehensively, wondering what the final outcome would be.

The answer came soon enough. In March an article appeared in *Die Musik* announcing the imminent rehabilitation of the conductor with the comment:

> Dr. Furtwängler has explained that he regrets any political consequences that have been attached to his article . . . on Hindemith . . . . He had absolutely no intention of intervening in matters of cultural policy, which he naturally acknowledges to be the domain of the Führer and his chosen minister alone . . . .

On April 26, accompanied by a storm of applause, Furtwängler once again mounted the podium to lead the Philharmonic. According to witnesses, it was a musical evening of stunning profundity, but the conductor was not allowed to enjoy his artistic triumph. The regime was determined to remind him of his humiliating political capitulation. The Führer sprang onto the stage from his seat in the first row, ostentatiously stretching his hand—a peace offering from the devil and a cynical demonstration of the triumph of political force over art.

The story is one of the saddest in the annals of cultural collaboration. And not least because the public seems to have remem-

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bered the handshake more than the display of personal courage that had preceded it.

Furtwängler's rehabilitation was not total, however. He never re-joined the *Reichsmusikkammer,* nor did he officially resume his posts at the Opera and Philharmonic. He declined to participate in a propaganda film about the Berlin Philharmonic, and refused to conduct in German-occupied territories during the war. When, in 1938, he accepted a position that put him in charge of Vienna's musical life, it was with the declared intention of protecting Vienna's musical institutions from being degraded according to Hitler's plan. (Hitler had planned to make his hometown of Linz the musical capital of Austria.) He made it known that the conducting of Nazi anthems was beneath his dignity. Whenever possible, he refused artistic appearances at Party functions. He never joined the Nazi party, nor any of its peripheral associations, where so many of his colleagues in public life attempted to display conspicuous non-enmity toward the regime. He even refused to abandon his social contacts with Jews and dissident émigrés, whom he met openly on concert tours abroad.

Why, then, with all this evidence of incorruptibility, was Furtwängler forced to undergo not one but two "denazification" processes in 1946 at the hands of the American occupation forces? Why, despite his acquittals, did his reputation remain so stained that a boycott was organized in 1947 to prevent him from signing a contract with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra? Why were his early interventions on behalf of Arnold Schoenberg and the violinist Carl Flesch—both of whom were victims of anti-Jewish sentiment at the Berlin Academy—virtually ignored by émigrés such as Thomas Mann, who particularly rebuked Furtwängler both during and after the war? Why did Arturo Toscanini's bellicose charge at the 1937 Salzburg Festival—"You are a Nazi!"—continue to haunt Furtwängler even a decade later, drastically limiting his postwar exposure to the American public? Even today, for reasons that have nothing to do with musical achievement, Furtwängler's Beethoven interpretations are less well known than those of the Italian maestro.

Of course, the answers to these questions lie in part in the counter-evidence that Furtwängler was not entirely incorruptible. First, he refused to dissociate himself permanently and unequivocally from the Third Reich: after his principled resignations, he made enough peace with the regime to conduct regularly in Germany and Austria in the late Thirties and early Forties, and to serve as a quasi-official cultural ambassador. As late as 1942, he reluctantly led the Philharmonic at a birthday celebration for Hitler. Then there was the simple fact of his accepting, four years after the Hindemith Affair, the Viennese administrative post. Finally, his prolific writings on the German musical tradition throughout this period were so prone to extol the "eternal German" that they seemed to offer themselves up for exploitation by the Nazi propaganda apparatus.

But collaboration is often a complex phenomenon, and Furtwängler's ambiguous, contradictory relations with the Nazi regime are not always easy to sort out. Two recent biographies, both of which were published in Germany in 1986, attempt to explore these relations and render a judgment on Furtwängler's troubled role during the Nazi period. They are Berndt Wessling's *Furtwängler: Eine kritische Biographie* and Fred K. Prieberg's *Kraftprobe: Wilhelm Furtwängler im Dritten Reich.*[1] Both books are of vital interest to anyone concerned with art and its place in the dark and murky world of totalitarian politics. As assessments of Furtwängler's unhappy role as collaborator, however, they both suffer from an unwillingness on the part of the authors to put aside political prejudices and national partisanship.

Berndt Wessling's work is not exclusively a political biography; it also offers some interesting commentary on Furtwängler's artistic development and his approach to music per-

1 Wessling's book was published by Heyne Verlag (Munich); Prieberg's by F.A. Brockhaus (Mannheim).

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formance and composition. But politics is its central theme. Unfortunately, Wessling's often smart and sarcastic style is so reminiscent of mass-circulation weeklies like *Der Spiegel* that one is tempted to dismiss his book as frivolous and unscholarly. One hardly trusts the intellectual sobriety of a biographer who refers to the city of Lübeck as the "Marzipan-Metropole," or who describes Berta Geissmar, Furtwängler's secretary (and later Sir Thomas Beecham's), as "not only high-minded, amply bosomed too, but so abysmally ugly that some took fright at seeing her for the first time."

But if Wessling's style is flippant, his indictment of Furtwängler is serious enough. Like his journalistic models, Wessling turns his deep horror at German war crimes everywhere into biting attack, and he advances the uncompromising argument that no collaboration with totalitarianism, no matter how passive, can leave the individual unstained. His view is concisely represented in the following harsh juxtaposition, one of several in the book. He is referring, in the sentence's second half, to Kristallnacht (Nov. 11, 1938), when synagogues and Jewish stores were pillaged and burned.

> Here . . . a triumphant reception for Furtwängler in Cologne . . . there the cries of fear, the death screams of the tortured and persecuted.

This is histrionics, not analysis. A position so extreme is too facile and reductive to have any relevance to the issue of individual responsibility. By such a reckoning almost everyone—excepting heroes and martyrs—cannot but fail miserably.

Wessling comes a bit nearer to relevant historical analysis when he narrows his attack and asserts his intention of debunking the myth of "inner emigration." The phrase is well known in Germany; it refers to the notion that one honorable response to Nazi totalitarianism was an inner retreat characterized by political silence and the determination to live for work alone. Wessling properly has little patience with those who insist that inner emigration constituted a form of resistance; but his approach is typically mean-spirited. "One need only consult the documents," he writes,

> the expressions of devotion, the propaganda photos, or the queer, crack-brained, madcap fantasy tales from the "denazification trials," where more lying was done than the Nazi regime did in the whole "thousand year . . . Reich," to recognize the crass misrepresentation for which the "inners" put their art to use.

Clearly, Wessling believes that Furtwängler cannot be defended on such grounds—nor, as it turns out, on any others. His portrait of the conductor is unrelentingly harsh, filled with the details of Furtwängler's copious weaknesses. He was a womanizer. He was petulantly jealous of his pre-eminence in the concert life of German-speaking countries. (Upon his return from an American tour he was livid to discover that his manager had arranged a Bruckner concert for Otto Klemperer; the tantrum he staged in her office claimed six porcelain cups.) His vanity bordered on the neurotic: he cavalierly regarded his postwar political trials as merely a "chapter" in the ongoing "War Against German Competition." How, Wessling implies, can we grant such a man even a single altruistic action or intention?

For Wessling, Furtwängler is just another of those artists who consider art "a free ticket" and who regard "opportunism as an inalienable right." Thus, the conductor's efforts to protect Jewish members of the Berlin and (later) Vienna Philharmonic orchestras were undertaken only in the interests of preserving the condition of his orchestras. That Furtwängler viewed Jewish artists as mere objects for his use, Wessling contends, is obvious in his appeals to non-German Jews *not* to cancel scheduled guest appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic for the 1933-34 season. Wessling harshly criticizes the conductor, who defended these appeals by saying "art has nothing to do with politics"; at the time, Wessling points out, Jewish conductors (read "the

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competition") were banned from the Philharmonic podium. Throughout his discussion, Wessling rejects the possibility that among Furtwängler's admittedly mixed motives was a laudable desire to salvage whatever quality in cultural life could be saved in extraordinarily difficult political circumstances.

Even the Hindemith Affair, for Wessling, is reduced to a demonstration of self-serving arrogance. He insists that the whole business was a ploy for attention, a bold test of prestige and influence. He makes sure to mention that in the scramble to be rehabilitated Furtwängler refused Hindemith all subsequent requests for support.

This line of argument is typical of the book. For Wessling, every sign of resistance by Furtwängler was at base egoistic. He of course fails to mention the examples of Furtwängler's intercession where he displayed purely unselfish motives—for example, his appeal on behalf of the left-leaning modernist critic Hans Heins Stuckenschmidt, who openly disliked Furtwängler.[2]

This omission is particularly striking since Wessling even goes so far as to imply that Furtwängler was responsible for the death of another unfriendly music critic. Apparently a certain Edwin von der Nüll was called up to army service as a result of the conductor's repeated requests to Goebbels to silence the critic's boundless praise of Herbert von Karajan, an up-and-coming conductor at that time. It is a nasty episode, one which, as it happened, much occupied the attention of American investigators after the war; but it is anything but clear-cut. Edwin von der Nüll might have been a genuine fan of Karajan's, but he was obviously encouraged to write what he did by forces in the SS hostile to Furtwängler. Wessling remarks that the denazification trial failed to achieve any clarity on this episode, and that Furtwängler's own testimony damaged his protestations of innocence—not to mention his claims to have also suffered from Nazi persecution. But Wessling himself feels under no obligation to clarify the issue with pertinent facts. In any case, he fails to mention that, whatever Furtwängler's spoken or unspoken desires, Nüll was drafted into a service no more dangerous than managing concerts for the *Luftwaffe*. His death as a volunteer in the 1945 Battle of Berlin can hardly be attributed to Furtwängler's devices.

What is most distressing about Wessling's determination to portray Furtwängler in the worst light possible is that he obscures the ways in which Furtwängler might truly fail to measure up to basic ethical standards.

In fact, Furtwängler tolerated some of the regime's rude encroachments in his professional life with damning equanimity—for example, the perfunctory dismissal of Berta Geissmar which followed on the heels of the Hindemith Affair.[3] His repeated appeals to Goebbels to halt the praising of Karajan in the press were indeed shameless examples of personal and professional vanity, if not the criminal acts Wessling would have us believe them to be. And even his defense of Hindemith is not without its troubling aspects. Its boldness certainly lay in the challenge itself, not in the argument with which it was made.

And then there is Furtwängler's peculiar ambivalence on the issue of the Nazis' moral transgressions against the Jews: when he defended the Jews, it was reluctantly, and as artists, not as human beings. Typical of Furtwängler's protests against anti-Semitic persecution was his intercession on behalf of the head of the Frankfurt Conservatory, Bernhard Sekles, which began: "Sekles would be one of the few Jews whose activities since I have known him (fifteen years) have been expressly constructive."

2 Ironically, Stuckenschmidt believed Furtwängler played a role in the de-validation of his work permit in 1934; actually, Furtwängler protested it.

3 Although in her memoirs Geissmar portrays herself as a willing martyr to Furtwängler's cause, it is fairly clear that the conductor distanced himself from his secretary in her time of need. Even his one effort on her behalf—securing her a passport so that she could leave the Continent—smacks of a desire to be rid of an embarrassing association.

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Wessling is probably right when he says that Furtwängler's repulsion for the regime was primarily an aesthetic one. There is no indication that Furtwängler ever called its political or moral legitimacy into question. He seems to have limited his opposition to cultural policy while imbuing his protests with an earnest respect for the authority of the state in other matters. The rapidity with which he chose to come to terms with the regime after the Hindemith Affair would indicate his eagerness to divorce himself from the passions he had stirred up in his audience. (It should be pointed out that a good percentage of this audience, up to 1938, was Jewish.) And certainly his public apology can only be read as a conscious surrender to the will of the Nazi leaders.

All of this signaled to observers abroad that Furtwängler's objections to the regime did not approach a level of profound dissent, let alone heroic resistance. Thus, Toscanini saw no reason to separate Furtwängler from the regime to which he lent his prestige, and the prospect of Furtwängler's accepting a contract with the New York Philharmonic in 1936 properly unleashed a storm of protest.

Underlying Furtwängler's ambivalent attitude toward the regime was a typically German reverence for the state and its assumption of moral authority. But there was more to it than that. Furtwängler was a nationalist in the late nineteenth-century German mode, deeply mistrustful of democratic institutions. One of the redeeming aspects of Wessling's book is the description he gives us of the moral decay of the Wilhelminian Right and its vulnerability to the Nazi onslaught.

There can be no doubt that Furtwängler took political sides before 1933, and that he chose the wrong side. The son of a famous archeologist and historian of ancient Greece, he was raised in an environment in which the very word "German" signified everything noble, desirable, and worthy of the classical inheritance. His parents, who were steeped in cultural elitism ("Beethoven-drunk," as Wessling puts it), propounded a xenophobic attachment to German classicism: the Teutonic nation had a superior artistic gift and a civilizing mission. Though Furtwängler's early education was determinedly anti-Wagnerian, he was infected early on with the kind of anti-Semitism for which Wagner is so infamous. Here as elsewhere it seems that for many cultured Germans at the turn of the century, whatever their aesthetic views, Jewry was associated with unwelcome signs of modernity.

Thus, even before 1933 Furtwängler's writings revealed an affinity with the principles that would underlie the cultural doctrine of National Socialism. They reflect a similar preoccupation with cultural decay and a distaste for "modernism"; they express a fear that Germany will lose its national cultural identity; and they call for the state's intervention to preserve the nation's floundering cultural institutions. These last were under attack from the recent deluge of mass-market entertainments and the disruption of concert activity due to economic depression. It was natural that Furtwängler would look to a strong government for financial and moral support, especially in light of the Berlin Philharmonic's inability to sustain itself as a private corporation.

But Furtwängler's ideological identification with the Nazis did not merely reside in his strong sense of German cultural identity and his desire to preserve a vital musical life. For one thing, he did not seem especially bothered by the way the Nazis intervened in cultural matters—namely, by muzzling dissenting voices. As early as 1933 he attributed the flowering of German classicism to its protection from "unfruitful, academic criticism." Such a statement illustrates the perverse anti-intellectualism that was so often a part of educated cultural conservatism in Weimar Germany.

By far the most disturbing element in Furtwängler's cultural outlook—and the one that goes far toward explaining his troubling response to National Socialism—was his anti-Semitism, his reservations about the Jews and their position at the center of German cultural life. There is no better example of his failure to accept German

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Jews as true compatriots and legitimate heirs to the German cultural tradition than his defense of the artists summarily dismissed from state service in April of 1933 on the grounds of their racial origin. In his open letter to Goebbels, Furtwängler wrote:

> If the struggle against Jewry is in the main directed against those artists who, themselves rootless and destructive, pursue influence through *Kitsch,* dry virtuosity, and the like, this is only in order. The struggle against them and the embodiment of that spirit—possessed also by some Germans—cannot be consequent enough. But when this struggle is directed against true artists, it is not in the interests of cultural life.

These famous lines, written early in the Nazi era, show the kind of moral and intellectual confusion that was to govern Furtwängler's outlook for the next decade: his willingness to tolerate morally repugnant policies so long as they did not violate the sacrosanct realm of high art, and to protest them only when they did.

In his *Kraftprobe* ("Trial of Strength"), Fred K. Prieberg is in many ways as generous to Furtwängler as Berndt Wessling is critical of him. He presents a wholly different approach to the phenomenon of Furtwängler's collaboration—giving us a day-to-day account of what he sees as a heroic artist's hopeless campaign against totalitarian political pressures.

Prieberg is no stranger to the subject of music and totalitarian power. In 1982, he published an extensive study entitled *Musik im NS-Staadt*, in which he offered harsh judgments concerning the collaboration of musicians during the Third Reich.[4] In his new book, however, Prieberg has modified his view substantially. Indeed, his *Kraftprobe* deserves a place in the revisionist movement of German historiography, a school which has recently sought to "relativize" the crimes of National Socialism by looking at them from the perspective of other twentieth-century crimes against humanity. The major revisionist thrust, as represented by the historian Ernst Nolte, has been to compare Nazi and Soviet institutions with the aim of finding the precedent for the German reign of terror in Soviet models rather than in nineteenth-century Prussian authoritarianism and militarism.[5]

Unlike Nolte, however, Prieberg demonstrates no special antagonism toward the Soviet Union. (The part of his political animosity that remains unspent on Nazism is reserved mostly for Western governments: at one point, he even compares German concentration camps to emigrant detention camps in Britain!) But certainly his larger aim is revisionist: to rehabilitate his subject's honor as a loyal German and to vilify the theory of collective responsibility by which all assenting German patriots—especially people in public life who remained in Germany during the Nazi period—are regarded as accomplices in mass murder.

To prove these points Prieberg would have needed only to apply to Furtwängler such criteria as are generally applied to major Soviet artists. In the case of the Soviets, we see that emigration is not always possible, and that when it *is* possible it is not always desired, even by the most intransigent political dissidents. How few have had the courage to abandon hearth and home,

4 My review of *Musik im NS-Staadt* appeared in the February 1983 issue of *The New Criterion.*

5 However profound its insights into totalitarianism, German revisionism has recently nourished some pernicious contentions of the radical Right. Nolte has disavowed anti-Semitism, but has little patience with the amount of "attention paid to the Final Solution." Perhaps the most alarming example of this kind of sentiment was Nolte's reference in a 1987 collection of essays *("Historikerstreit")* to the Hitler apologist David Irving in a debate concerning the uniqueness of the Final Solution: "Chaim Weizmann's statement of . . . September 1939 that world Jewry would fight on the side of England," Nolte wrote, "would justify [Irving's] thesis that Hitler had the right to treat German Jews as prisoners of war, and therefore, to intern them."

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a creative milieu, and a secure economic existence!

But Prieberg goes much further. He elevates his subject to a *cause célèbre,* claiming that Furtwängler played the role of scapegoat. "According to Hebrew legend," he writes, "it was upon the scapegoat's head that the high priest symbolically . . . laid all the sins of Israel." The mention of ancient Jewish religious practice in this context is not coincidental. Somebody, it seems, must be held accountable for the slander of this blameless man. So why not the Jews—specifically, jealous Jewish émigré musicians? Prieberg writes:

> The music business went on in any case in the [Third] Reich . . . . The emigrants noticed this with discomfort, for if their absence did not have the expected results, the illusion of their irreplaceability was broken. This nourished their hate, and gave it a direction; for were not those musicians who remained finally able to forget their former Jewish colleagues and make them superfluous? So far as these "betrayers" were of prominence one could not attack them on artistic grounds. But it was enough to denounce them as Hitler's lackeys . . . . That this hate should center on [Furtwängler] has to do with his position . . . . He was a symbol . . . . He embodied . . . as no other German musician, German music.

As extreme as this may sound, even more extreme and absurd is Prieberg's overriding thesis that Furtwängler, by steering a strategic course, consistently attempted to impose on the regime not only artistic but *moral* standards. Prieberg's understanding of Nazism is profound enough to admit the ideological centrality of the "Jewish Question" and the contempt for high culture inherent in the Nazis' racial policies. Unfortunately, it leads him to build a case for Furtwängler's having waged a private war against anti-Semitism. He taunts doubters with the assertion that the conductor's efforts on behalf of the Jews were either ignored or misunderstood by bitter émigrés, who had no understanding of Furtwängler's "'conspiratorial undertaking' in the racial war."

But to speak of Furtwängler "viewing himself as a moral example," to tell the reader that he "recognized only one lord, the Lord God," to assign him the status of soldier in a racial war—all this is to misrepresent the conductor's motives as well as his actions. There is no evidence anywhere—including the previously unpublished sources that Prieberg makes available to us—that Furtwängler undertook any action on behalf of the Jews outside the realm of culture. Prieberg confirms a hundred times over that such recalcitrance as Furtwängler exhibited on the "Jewish Question" centered solely on the issue of cultural merit.

Indeed, there is a disturbing discrepancy between Prieberg's picture of Furtwängler —the wily savior of German humanism— and the picture presented by his sources: that of a man for whom public policy had much less to do with mitigating human suffering than with fulfilling the demands of the state. Prieberg draws a portrait in line with the regime's suspicions: of a sovereign cultural hero sympathetic to the Jews. The evidence, however, reveals something closer to a zealous Prussian bureaucrat who happened to have a profound artistic sensibility.

For even if Furtwängler had no intention of giving up his Jewish friends and colleagues, or of abandoning the music of Mendelssohn, he approached his role in *Kulturpolitik* with an unseemly desire to "re-educate" himself ideologically. And he hardly did so as a means of distracting the enemy from his own virtuous "conspiratorial" activities. Some private notes dating from as early as June of 1933 are especially revealing in this respect. Prieberg soberly alleges that they were meant to establish a "negotiating position" with Goebbels, but they seem really to attest to the strength of the invidious political pressures by which honest men can be made to serve evil:

> Jewish Question in Musical Life
>
> Highly gifted race!
> Within the orchestra the percentage of Jews

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not too high. Must be defended as soloists. As audience they are indispensable!

All fulfillments of vacancies—if dismissals not to be avoided—must be undertaken with necessary expense of time and responsibility.

Interventions in the free realm of art which are not based on question of quality are impossible. In this case, I must resign.

The lever must be applied here where it is essential—where opinion is made in the Jewish press. For this the following is necessary:
1) Surreptitious review of the existing Jewish press by professionals.
2) Creation and support of our own [Party] organs which did not exist until now. Here one must utilize intellect, which is much more at National Socialism's disposal than it knows at this point.

Standpoints: as employees or self-employed without business trickery, Jews must be allowed to remain, but not in responsible organizing or leadership positions. Opinion-making must be watched. Boycott should be limited to business life, perhaps to agents. *Not* to extend to art: Here there must be a clear delineation. If the boycott . . . is extended to that realm of art which is above politics I must resign my post immediately. From the standpoint of propaganda the intervention in the independent realm of art would prove most ominous . . . . Jew unmolested, where he engages himself as individual with own reason and ability, without tool of organization, mass, i.e., as artist, singer, etc. But here one must also be clear about what he can offer and what not. The influence of the Jewish press must be broken above all with intellectual tools. One must build up a press that one hasn't yet had—in music, in any case. Besides, one must get rid of those Jewish writers exhibiting certain tendencies so far as one can. They belong out of administration; in the free professions, as far as unusual ability is apparent, they [Jews] must be protected. But concert life without them is not *possible,* an operation which would end with the patient's death.

Prieberg offers a host of such examples of moral and intellectual vacillation from Furtwängler's private papers. Yet he refuses to take seriously what they reveal about the German conservative *Weltanschauung.* For Prieberg, Furtwängler's exaggerated national pride, his political naïveté, his taste for authoritarianism, and even his anti-Semitism were only superficial blemishes of character, common to many people in Germany in the Twenties and Thirties. He recounts for the wide-eyed some shameful anti-Jewish utterances of Thomas Mann—as well as Fritz Kreisler's confused words of praise for the German national revolution—as if to ask: "Didn't everyone?" (The answer is: "No.")

He also makes much of Furtwängler's psychological disposition to ensnare himself in a hopeless struggle with totalitarian power. In Prieberg's view, it had to do with his conviction that art is invested with a moral authority whose claims supersede all others and whose survival is the greatest obligation of the state. Such a conviction is said to explain—or excuse—Furtwängler's dogged efforts to find himself an administrative niche in the Nazi regime (from which he might serve the muse unmolested) even after it should have been obvious to him that service to art in such a context meant slavery to the arbitrary will of criminals.

Prieberg is not entirely wrong in his description of Furtwängler's view of art, of course. The question is whether that view exonerates Furtwängler of wrongdoing or justifies his elevation to the status of a righteous soldier in the racial war. In any case, Prieberg concedes that Furtwängler's ideas about the power of art were tragically wrong. He traces their origin to a nineteenth-century romantic idea that first defined art as a kind of metaphysics and then applied aesthetic criteria to political affairs, as if these aesthetic criteria constituted moral imperatives.

And indeed, ever since Wagner, artists have demonstrated a tendency to believe that aesthetic achievement is an indication of moral and political superiority—that it even justifies aberrant political opinions. The evidence for such aesthetic conceit in Furtwängler's case can be found not only in his unshaken loyalty to the German nation dur-

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ing the war but also in his inability to perceive how gravely Nazi crimes damaged his nation's honor. In 1945, he wrote angrily:

> It is frightful to make our whole people responsible for the concentration camp horror . . . to deny the honor of a nation which can compete with any . . . when it comes to inner nobility; for it produced Beethoven and Goethe and unendingly many other greats . . . . The German people will never accept this!

It is unfortunate that, when confronted with this vast overestimation of the power of high culture to absolve a nation, Prieberg sees only the failure of one artist's critical faculty. He does not see how pervasive the problem was—the extent to which art came to replace religion as a legitimation of the German state in the twentieth century. We should remember that until the 1860s Germany's national identity was a cultural and not a political fact. It is not surprising that even after unification, especially during the interwar period, German politicians coveted high culture as a way of overcoming political disunity and healing the recent breach with monarchical institutions. Nor is it surprising that, when their turn came, the Nazis used art, and artists, for their own ruthless ends. Oddly, Prieberg views the state's incursions into the realm of culture quite neutrally. He writes:

> The arts, especially music, have no moral consequences. They belong merely to the self-evident administrative apparatus of the state, completely independent of regime.

He even likens the state's cultural bureaucracy to the "large technical complexes [that] provide consumers with energy, information, water."

Obviously Prieberg's materialistic assessment of high culture is at odds with Furtwängler's own exalted view of his vocation, which explains the otherwise inexplicable indictment of Furtwängler with which Prieberg ends his biography. After some four hundred and fifty pages of energetic apology, he leaves us with the comment that the conductor finally "sacrificed himself to his own mythology" concerning art. Furtwängler thus turns out to be, in Prieberg's account, a kind of Don Quixote of the concert podium, foolishly fighting for some meaningless ideal against overwhelming odds.

Obviously there is much in this assessment that is simply wrong. First, there were more insidious threats to Furtwängler's integrity than his "illusions" about art: there were, for example, the very real political threats from the regime, and, it must be said, the weaknesses of Furtwängler's own political outlook, which caused him to misjudge the moral horror of the Third Reich and to feel that his beloved Germany was redeemable so long as his own precious world of art was allowed to him.

Second, as Furtwängler's magnificent interpretations of Beethoven and Bruckner will attest, the artistic ideal is not meaningless. Whatever the "moral consequences" of art, it does offer the possibility of transcendence. That is another reason why politicians and nations hunger for its prestige—for its power to elevate those who come into contact with it. It is precisely Furtwängler's "mythology" concerning art that allows us to qualify our view of his collaboration. If he is not the devil that Berndt Wessling makes him out to be, it is because Furtwängler's devotion to art led him to act honorably at times—as in the Hindemith Affair. Unfortunately, that devotion was too narrow, too infrequently acted upon, and morally too limited to justify any attempt to portray him as some kind of misunderstood hero.

Had Prieberg spent a few words on Furtwängler's artistic gifts, or had Wessling assigned them a proper value, they might both have better understood the peculiar mixture of idealism and opportunism that guided Furtwängler through the Nazi era. They might even have been able to end with the disconcerting but at the same time hopeful assertion that, whatever the artist's frailties, however barbarous the political milieu, art itself seems to emerge unscathed.

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Poems *by Peter Davison, Charles Edward Eaton & Jane Kenyon*

Cracks in the universe

(For Chiu Desiu)

1. *Chiu Desiu*

Far from Shanghai and ill at ease among
the babble of gallery-goers, he caught the eye
of an American, swivelled his moon face
toward a wall of his paintings, asking anxiously,
"I see crack in universe. You see?"
Yes, I see. I see. He has soaked layers
of Chinese rice paper in inks as bright
as a severed artery gushing blood
or the wing of a little blue heron silvered with lightning
or a live chrysanthemum catching on fire.
Beyond our sight-lines he has planted eyes
that catch the eyes of those who have eyes to see,
and lets the universe peer back at us.

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2. *Valtellina*

Along this valley, doorsill of the Alps,
great River Adda slices through the mountains
due east due west. A festal summer sun
smiles at the northern slope as at a bosom
on whose round apron cataracts of grapes
bloom into crimson bubbles. River Adda's
southerly bank holds back a shadow forest
that shelters dark encampments of deer and boar.
The wine is called Inferno, juice of Hell.
After they've trampled it they gather mushrooms,
plants without leaves or sexuality,
attesting to the funerals of the trees,
the juice of hell, the phallus of the dead.

O Valtellina, guiltless as a crying
baby in the pathway of a flood,
may Hell protect you from utility,
damming or bottling you, sowing your banks
with spikes of utility towers, piercing your hills
with holes to bleed the arteries of steam
we humans may harness for our purposes:
feeding halogen highways, curling hair,
deranging sultry nights with a whirring fan.

3. *Beyond Sight Lines*

The wild remember what the dead retain.
Dogs bark and bristle at the noise of silence.
Shamans laid out portions of food for spirits
so that the gods would act on human need
in answer to a simple task, made pure
by emptying it of its utility.
Just so our prayers make tracks across a stream,
and reason can find no traces of a passage
although it knows the word has gone to ground.
Our lives have changed the earth, not merely scarred it:
it exhales intention as we pass.

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4. *Edge*

Reason's hands reach out but cannot touch
the spectral evasions that have been ordained
but never pocketed. Call them immeasurable,
call them unknown, the limits of the mind.
We ride the world like monkeys on a stallion
we cannot curb or steer. Our names for it
insult the world: we'd strip its body bare
in appetite to govern. If we gained
control, we'd spur ourselves to the abyss
that we have tried to think unthinkable.

5. *Waking*

At the far edge of sleep
or in uttermost despair
at the outcome of these dreams
we press beyond the boundaries
of ignorance and heartbreak.
"I see crack in universe. You see?"
O yes. I see. I see.

—Peter Davison

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Moonlight and madness

It is the sort of thing you may have dreamt for years:
A man in the moonlight, lucid, cool, a little cruel,
As if the garden somewhere held a mammoth vase of tears.

Even in the dream you know it is a kind of craze—
These are the things discarded when you could not stand
them anymore,
Drop by drop, too cold, too moonlit to be called the sweat
of days.

For you have lain, as moist as any man, in her glorious arms,
Taken up the pen that scattered spots expanding like the sea,
And written of, not written off, a tale of her voluptuous charms.

Still, this sense of life's effluvia always underlies
The shotput in the sun, the stalled car, the pushing up
the hill,
The strangely alabaster little tear running from her eyes.

This is when the promise of the moonstruck dream takes over.
No cup will do, no bowl—it must be something like a massive
urn
To hold all we think that we have lost as athlete and as lover.

It never fills, it never tips—it is an icon on the moonlit land,
Almost comforting to those who struggled up the hill or kissed
so much,
And felt bewildered muscles slacken, and the tear dry on the hand.

—Charles Edward Eaton

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Christmas away from home

This time sickness brought me to Connecticut.
Mornings I walk the dog: that part of life
is intact. Who's painted, who's insulated
or put siding on, who's burned the lawn
with lime—that's the news on Ardmore Street.

The leaves of the neighbor's respectable
rhododendrons curl under in the cold.
He has backed the car
through the white nimbus of its exhaust
and disappeared for the day.

In a hiatus between mayors
the city has left leaves in the gutters,
and passing cars lift them in maelstroms.

We pass the house two doors down, the one
with the wildest lights in the neighborhood,
an establishment without irony.
All summer their putto empties a water jar,
their St. Francis feeds the birds.
Now it's angels, festoons, waist-high
candles, and swans pulling sleighs.

The dog dives for a fire hydrant,
yanking me along.
A dime store postcard scene . . .

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Two hundred miles north I'd let him run
among birches and the black shade of pines.
I miss the hills, the woods and stony
streams, where the swish of jacket sleeves
against my sides seems loud, and a crow
caws sleepily at dawn.

By now the streams must run under a skin
of ice, white air-bubbles passing erratically,
like bloodcells through a vein. Soon the mail,
forwarded, will begin to reach me here.

—Jane Kenyon

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Art

Announcements

by Jed Perl

Like the montages of newspaper headlines that the old Hollywood directors employed to suggest a leap forward in the narrative, the piles of gallery announcements that flood our mailboxes in the early fall are a sure sign that things are going to start happening very fast. The variety of sizes and styles in announcements is fairly large and in a state of constant flux; raining down on us from the hundreds of galleries that crowd the metropolis, they form an information blizzard that is both exciting and disorienting. There's nothing new about the appeal of a beautifully designed announcement or catalogue—standards set in the Thirties and Forties by the galleries of Julien Levy, Pierre Matisse, and Curt Valentin can be matched but scarcely excelled—and yet in the current period of unprecedented expansion what is chosen in the way of typography and design may be the result of calculations way beyond the imaginings of the dealers of a generation or two ago.

The color postcard announcing a show of paintings or sculptures is now pretty much out of favor, no doubt because the artist who presents his work directly and without guile risks appearing naïvely sincere. Full color reproduction is so ubiquitous as to strike many as banal. And who trusts a medium that has time and again drawn us to galleries where the art fails to live up to even the slim promise of the announcement? The color reproduction asks too much of a harassed and harried public—a public ill equipped to make the imaginative leap into a world only the artist really understands.

Some galleries and museums are turning from a straight photograph of the work to a photograph that spins a little story about the artist or the exhibition. This is the idea behind the announcement that the Anne Plumb Gallery sent out for a show of David Hacker's sculpture in September and October. The color postcard takes us into what appears to be Hacker's studio—a dark, industrial-looking space with one of his big loud painted-metal constructions looming out of the dark. We see the art, but it's really treated here as ambience, a setting against which to glimpse a back view of the artist, who turns out to be a hunk in regulation white T-shirt and black jeans. The place, the pose, all spell excitement. The same is true of the black-and-white snapshot that's on the announcement for the preview of British punk-rock impresario Malcolm McLaren's show at The New Museum. McLaren—an entrepreneur's entrepreneur who prompted *Village Voice* columnist C. Carr to observe, "in the age of consumption, revolutions begin in the stores"—looks thin and a bit wan. He's sandwiched between two British cops who, according to a caption, are arresting him "during the Queen's Jubilee celebration, London, 1977." What can be the point here except to suggest that danger is in the air, and that the preview might turn out to be a great party, a real smash?

It's but a quick jump from the announce-

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ment that presents the gallery as a theater of social unrest (the Starn Twins sent out the catalogue for their double show this fall at Stux and Castelli in an envelope imprinted with newspaper reports about last summer's Tompkins Square Park melee) to the announcement that pitches the gallery as a spiritual sanctuary. The exhibition space empty of visitors can have a seductiveness all its own, as in the photograph that alerts us to minimalist Peter Joseph's show at Kent Fine Art. Here we see a corner of the gallery, with several paintings on adjacent walls and light streaming in through a strip of window. Printed on matte stock in pale tones of yellow, blue, and pink, the scene takes on a Photo-Secessionist softness that's mightily beguiling. The light of Fifty-seventh Street streams across the stone floor, creating a veritable annunciation in an art gallery, and bestowing limpidity on paintings that are in reality closed and dry.

Gone forever are the days of the little printer who could turn something lovely out for a song. The arrival in the mail of pieces of heavy card stock, sometimes double-faced in contrasting colors, is as much of a deluxe sensuous experience as going through the racks in a chic clothing store. From the Washburn Gallery to the Stux Gallery, transparent papers are immensely popular. These are evanescent signs of conspicuous luxury, tickling the imagination like some of the new gallery décor that you see around SoHo, where walls of thick blocks or thin frosted sheets of glass create a sense of looking through, of mysteries in inner offices. The announcement for "Transcendent," a group show at the David Beitzel Gallery, is printed in pale gray on strong, translucent, vellum-like paper; it's an announcement that one studies, wondering whether the vague shapes over which the typography is imprinted are body parts or folded cloth. You hold this up to the light, turn it this way and that, but it finally reveals almost nothing about the exhibition, which was in fact full of dark, ponderous works.

While paper, in its texture and color, can be luxuriantly avant-garde, typography has gone into a period of retrenchment and conservatism. Bauhaus asymmetry is little used, replaced by an insistent symmetry; many prominent galleries are sending out announcements that recall typography in the business world, with its serif types and raised lettering. Only the dusky colors—deep forest greens, brick reds—suggest something hedonist or artistic, and make a light joke of designs that might otherwise appear more appropriate to a Park Avenue wedding than a SoHo gallery. Surely this recent style in announcements is a response to the taste of the paying public, another sign that if the current art world was ushered in by radical chic, its values have been institutionalized by nearly eight years of Reagan-style prosperity.

The announcement for the show of work by Thomas Lanigan Schmidt at the Holly Solomon Gallery can be interpreted as a send-up of the conservative style in announcements. A cream-colored rectangle, the size of a business card and bearing the relevant dates and times, arrived wrapped in a mocking blue foil package that unfolded to reveal, of all things, a flaky, one-page short story scrawled on pink paper. There's sub-Ronald Firbank humor to the story, which opens, "Filthy! Disgusting! Get your hands out of there! His lips said 'Stop.' His eyes said 'Go!'" The best of Schmidt's staple-and-tin-foil constructions, such as *Noli me Tangere,* where Hollywood kitsch is the subject, continue in this giggly, adolescent vein; Schmidt is on far less firm ground when he seriously invokes the reliquaries and icons of Byzantium, those works that trigger ecstatic feeling through a formal inventiveness way beyond his amusing capacities.

If Schmidt makes a little joke on the business-style announcement, the card for the show of work by Italian post-minimalist Jannis Kounellis at Mary Boone apotheosizes it. Out of Boone's envelope comes a five-and-three-quarter by eight-inch rectangle of what looks like handmade paper—thick, white, finished with beautifully uneven edges. Kounellis, an artist whose

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arrangements of rough-hewn bits of wood and dusky sheets of steel are much in demand this season, needs no photograph as an introduction to Boone's audience. His show, which consisted of a wall relief of rock and burlap sacks bolted to metal panels, had a certain grim authenticity. The announcement, adorned with nothing but the artist's name, the show dates, and the gallery's name and address, all in heavily embossed letters, is by contrast an object of delectation—an elegant paper tombstone.

Along with the flood of announcements comes the only slightly smaller flood of catalogues. These range in extent from a little brochure for Alan Johnston's show of monochromatic abstractions at the Jack Tilton Gallery—which includes a few paragraphs of introduction to the work ("They are songs, they are monuments") and a sheet of onionskin giving the show dates and the hours of the opening—to a full color job for the show of three-dimensional paintings by Rodney Ripps at Marisa del Re. This catalogue contains four slam-bang pages of text by Donald Kuspit, the Rambo of art writers, who pumps the word processor the way others pump iron.

The brief catalogue essay is a good opportunity for the writer to take up a position as the artist's advocate. Strict minds may disapprove of this style in art writing; but friendly curiosity isn't necessarily any more of a deterrent to discrimination than the professional dispassion that all too often masks indifference. There are ways to write out of affection or sympathy and still say something that's valuable and even critical, *if* one knows the meaning of silences, of the passed-over comment that conveys what's left unsaid. But the line between discriminating friendliness and something more like world-weariness isn't always clear, a case in point being the essay that Joseph Masheck has contributed to the catalogue of Doug Anderson's show at the Stux Gallery. This catalogue is a design doozy: cover in dusky rose with dots printed in green and name printed in black; interior pages for type in another green, flecked with darker bits; while the illustrations of Anderson's romantic images of flowers floating on a chiaroscuro of old-fashioned decorative fabrics are reproduced in tones of sepia or purple. Masheck introduces the artist as a character he meets at some event. Anderson, Masheck writes, "did not perform the trick, so common in these parts, of seconding a motion he happened not to comprehend; but from what he did say he had evidently caught my drift." Clearly, the critic is putting himself up; but we were already on notice about this, from the tony excerpt from *The Education of Henry Adams* that introduces the little essay. The excuse for the Adams quotation may be that Anderson, like Adams, comes from Boston; but the intellectual overkill—which includes in two quick pages references to Adams, Rousseau, Henry James, Winckelmann, and half a dozen artists—lends a sour edge to Masheck's interesting picture of the art-world mentality today.

Collins and Milazzo, the curatorial team who pioneered the devilishly inscrutable catalogue essay about half a decade ago, weigh in this fall with another green-covered catalogue, for "Primary Forms, Mediated Structures," at the Massimo Audiello Gallery. The cover is in a mossy hue, with a light weave to the paper that's reminiscent of the fancy Eaton letter paper on which elegant relatives wrote their thank-you notes a couple of decades ago. Collins and Milazzo have come a long way since the mid-Eighties, when their essays tended to be disseminated in plebeian xerox form: their success mirrors the success of an entire up-from-the-East Village generation. What is most interesting in the text for the Audiello catalogue is the duo's tendency to quote obsessively from their own earlier essays—some of which may now be out of print and even collectible. It's as if Collins and Milazzo are a little anxious to assert their precedence, and their particular view of a period a few years ago when, to quote a text that's like the higher junk food, "cooption was culturally bumped-up to reification." Many of their group shows have been

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preoccupied with the romance of the past and the romance of the future, or of both simultaneously, as in "The Antique Future," mounted at Audiello's old East Village space in 1987. Now, pondering the recent past, Collins and Milazzo may be trying to insure themselves a place in a future that even they, heaven help us, can't any longer predict.

Look at gallery ephemera and you see, first, the velvet glove of a privileged world, and, a little later on, the iron fist that lurks within. We all know that art cannot exist except in an economy that deflects money from basic needs to luxury consumption—this is true of all periods, from medieval Florence to modern New York—and few would argue for bringing justice to an unjust world by going after the wealthy person who really loves art and has the wherewithal to live with, say, a Bonnard. But more and more of the money that is being interjected into the art world is something sinister—a violent assertion of power, unrelated to anything we can associate with taste, discrimination, or love. Gallery giveaways are one of the lightest and on the face of it least egregious assertions of the power of money. Still, anyone who has seen a printer's bill knows mere cleverness or taste won't get one very far; which is not to say that those who don't have the money can be let off the hook. While the artist who takes fashion into account when at work in the studio is most likely a charlatan, the artist who refuses to consider fashion when presenting the work to the world is probably a fool. The current scene twists even the noblest soul into a desperado, and may end up bringing out the Dadaist in each one of us. It was Marcel Duchamp who made the ultimate statement about gallery giveaways in 1953 when he designed the catalogue for "Dada 1916-1923" at the Sidney Janis Gallery as a sheet of tissue paper that was wadded up into a ball and left for gallery-goers to pull out of a trash can.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Martin Green's "New York 1913" *by Hilton Kramer*
The Harold Brodkey phenomenon *by Bruce Bawer*
Poussin in Fort Worth *by Creighton Gilbert*
The young Wittgenstein *by Roger Kimball*
J. F. Powers *by Terry Teachout*
Courbet in Brooklyn *by Jed Perl*
Zamyatin's heresies *by David Gurewich*

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In search of Camille Claudel

by Eric Gibson

What are we to make of the sculptor Camille Claudel (1864-1943), Rodin's student, assistant, and mistress, who spent the last half of her life in an insane asylum, dying a virtual unknown? To be sure, since the 1984 retrospective of her work at the Musée Rodin in Paris, there has been more opportunity to learn about Claudel and her work than ever before. Yet in place of dispassionate scholarship and clear-headed analysis, much of what has been published about her has, at least of late, consisted of one-sided discussions of her work and innuendo leveled against Rodin and members of the Claudel family. It is as if the calamities that befell her—rather than anything she produced in the studio—entitled her to recognition as a serious artist.

Given this state of affairs, it is tempting to view the Claudel revival as another case of special pleading, the rehabilitation of a deservedly forgotten figure on grounds of art politics or sentimentality. But Claudel's case *is* worth considering. First, she was an extremely talented sculptor—not the greatest, perhaps, but capable in her best moments of holding her own among her contemporaries in Paris. Second, Claudel's story is a genuinely tragic one.

Camille Claudel was endowed from the beginning with a precocious gift for sculpture (she was producing Salon-quality portrait busts at the age of sixteen). She became a student of Rodin's before she was twenty, and the relationship soon broadened. Claudel posed for Rodin and acted as his studio assistant; she was even entrusted with modeling the hands of some of his sculptures, a measure of Rodin's respect for her talent, as he considered hands to be the most expressive part of the human body. The two soon began an affair, in spite of Rodin's ongoing relationship with Rose Beuret, his companion of over a decade and the mother of his son. Claudel is herself believed to have borne two children by Rodin.

By the early Nineties, the affair was coming to an end; evidently, Rodin was reluctant to abandon Rose to marry Camille. Claudel became increasingly reclusive, and self-consciously adopted a sculptural style very different from her previous, Rodin-influenced manner, in order to escape her mentor completely.

The first signs of mental unbalance had begun to manifest themselves at the time the affair went sour. There is no way of knowing whether it was brought on by the deteriorating liaison, or if it would have occurred anyway. In any event, Claudel seems to have been convinced of a conspiracy by Rodin to plagiarize her work, then (aided by his friends) to ostracize and ruin her, and she experienced wild swings of mood. When "up" she would make sculpture, and when "down" she would destroy whole groups of work. As time went on, she grew more and more isolated from the outside world. Rodin tried repeatedly to see her, to send commissions her way, and to send her money (which she

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only accepted when ignorant of its source). Within the Claudel family, only her father would have anything to do with her, and when he died in 1913, the others had Camille committed to a psychiatric hospital under a law requiring only a physician's signature. No relatives ever came to visit her in the asylum, except, once, her brother Paul, the famous poet and dramatist. Prohibited from making sculpture, her only outlet was letter writing. Long before she died in 1943, Paul was using her life story as an object lesson in the dangers of pursuing a life in art.

It is a tragic case of an artist diverted from a promising career by personal misfortune and family callousness. That it is not the first such case doesn't make it any less affecting, of course. But when we want to take a fuller measure of her life and art, there are obstacles in our way. For one thing, her output is lamentably small; and the documentary material dealing with her life is scarce. (Typically, an envelope in the Musée Rodin archives that once contained the crucial correspondence between Rodin and Claudel is now mysteriously empty.) Even more troubling, however, is another sort of obstacle: Claudel's life story and the aura of mystery that still surrounds it have become grist for the mill of those interested in making her a kind of martyr to art and to her gender. According to this scenario, Claudel was a great sculptor whose destiny went unfulfilled owing to her having been unjustly abused by her family and driven mad by her self-serving lover, upon whom she is said to have exerted an influence no one is willing to acknowledge. Leading the charge, as it were, is Reine-Marie Paris, the artist's grand-niece (her grandfather was Paul Claudel).

Paris's new biography of Camille Claudel must be the worst biography of an artist ever written.[1] We're told on the dust jacket that Paris is a writer and a professor. Whatever she teaches, it can't be art history. There's hardly anything that is useful about Claudel's work anywhere in the book. Breathy, melodramatic, and inclined to innuendo, Paris seems intent on perpetuating rather than dispelling the myths that have surrounded the artist—as long as, this time, they reflect well on her great-aunt. For example, speaking of Rodin's masterpiece, *The Gates of Hell,* she writes: "[Claudel] lent her body to more than one damned soul and many of the figures may have been made by her." By making this last claim, she implicitly promotes Claudel from model to co-creator on the project, even though the late Frederic V. Grunfeld, in his 1987 biography of the sculptor, credits her with more limited involvement, sculpting details, making enlargements, and the like. Elsewhere, Paris asserts Claudel's influence on Rodin, the only writer on either artist to make such a claim.:

> It is difficult to imagine that the great sculptor ever actually plagiarized or stole from Camille Claudel. The reality is much more complex: [her] obsession with theft and plagiarism was a subtle and unconscious transference—Camille had given away a part of her genius to Rodin and now she could not get it back from him . . . . Until 1913 . . . at exhibitions and in collectors' homes, Camille was more than likely to see [in Rodin's work] larger and modified versions of her own statues—works inspired by her ideas or created thanks to them.

Finally, Paris is embarrassingly biased in her assessment of the two artists' work. We are told, for instance, that

> although certainly capable of expressing an idea, especially when he had to submit to the discipline of a specific commission—*The Burghers of Calais* and *Balzac* are examples—Rodin mishandled countless subjects because of his inability to conceive and master ideas. *The Thinker (Le Penseur)* is a powerful paleontological athlete at rest, but it is easy enough to see that he has a long way to go before he is a Pascal.

1 *Camille: The Life of Camille Claudel, Rodin's Muse and Mistress,* translated from the French by Liliane Emery Tuck; Seaver Books, 258 pages, $29.95.

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The tone changes for Camille Claudel, however, whose

> best works are the fruits of her research and careful thought, and they ripen. Each work is the result of a special and renewed attention and is born out of and for the idea it expresses. Process and formula as creative methods are completely foreign to Camille Claudel, as are repetitions and revivals. The figures that comprise her groups are not interchangeable.

The comments on Rodin are simply splenetic, and those on Claudel inaccurate, especially the remarks in the last two sentences, which are meant as digs at Rodin's practice of re-using figures from one sculpture to another. For one thing, Claudel used the same pose, if not the same figure, in at least three different sculptures; for another, Rodin's habit of recombination doesn't denote imaginative impoverishment. It was a practice central to his aesthetic, as anyone who knows anything about Rodin's work will understand. Among other things, it provided Rodin with a means of breaking with academic naturalism, which regarded the sculptured figure as the direct, unique counterpart of the model in nature.

Readers interested in a more balanced account of Claudel's life should turn to the ninth chapter of Frederic V. Grunfeld's biography of Rodin. Grunfeld went to the same documentary sources as Paris, but came up with a far more even-handed chronicle of her life.

Under the circumstances, then, it came as something of a relief finally to be able to see Claudel's work and judge her firsthand. The opportunity arose when the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, hosted a retrospective of the Claudel's work that had been touring Japan last year.[2] Organized by the ubiquitous Reine-Marie Paris along with Meredith Martindale, an American art historian living in Paris, the show was made up of about sixty sculptures, paintings, and drawings, and it included important works whose whereabouts were unknown at the time of the Musée Rodin exhibition in 1984.

"Camille Claudel" was the ideal show for the Women's Museum, an institution which has yet to establish itself as a credible presence in the museum world, and by and large it was a success. Certainly Claudel's work held its own sufficiently to dispel any doubts that the show was a case of gender-related special pleading. At points it was even moving. The realization that one was in the presence of an artist of real talent was quickly followed by an acute awareness of what had been lost in this troubled, abbreviated career. Yet even this exhibition was unable to make Claudel stand out in sharp relief. It didn't help that the show was up for only a month (a circumstance forced on the museum by certain lenders). Even worse, the catalogue was written by Reine-Marie Paris, bad news for anyone looking for a discussion of Claudel's sculpture from an aesthetic perspective. Here is Paris's account of the artist's *Bust of Rodin* (1892):

> All of the ambiguities of Auguste Rodin are concentrated here: the beastly and panic-stricken terror of the Minotaur who swallows young victims and the overriding genius of an ancient prophet of the champion of his dear Michelangelo. Claudel sculpted the bust of Rodin, portraying the majesty of his destiny, in the full bloom of her love, before the pain and hatred destroyed it.

The empty melodrama of this passage is even clearer when it is set beside a passage from Bruno Gaudichon's 1984 catalogue. He is commenting on the same work:

> In fact, tying in with the [earlier] subjective portraits of her family, Camille Claudel interprets her teacher's face by approaching the model's character in two ways. The problem of

2 "Camille Claudel" was on view at the National Museum of Women in the Arts from April 25 through May 31. The catalogue, written by Reine-Marie Paris and Meredith Martindale, was published by the museum; 114 pages, $24.95.

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likeness is essentially resolved by the working of the "heavy beard, which sticks out and forms a pedestal" [the phrase is from a biography of Claudel by Mathias Morhardt], laying stress on one objective characteristic of the individual. But Camille Claudel goes beyond this simple consideration of resemblance by imparting to the bust a stronger Rodinian flavor than in any of her other works. The mistress, the student, thus pays homage to her master, realizing a sort of self-portrait of Rodin. [My translation]

Finally, the exhibition fell victim to a good idea that backfired. About a dozen Rodin sculptures, all works she had posed for, were added to Claudel's. The point, of course, was to show what an important place she occupied in the artist's life. But the juxtaposition was unfortunate. Forty-five years after her death, and at a time of belated recognition, Claudel was forced to stand again in Rodin's shadow.

As the exhibition showed, the hard truth is that Claudel came into her own as a sculptor while in Rodin's orbit, and was never as good once she had passed out of it. It may seem unfair to compare her with Rodin, but it is inevitable, since it was always in terms of Rodin that she defined herself, even when she was repudiating him. Besides, what late nineteenth-century sculptor can avoid such a comparison?

Claudel's work up to the time she met Rodin in 1883 is well within the academic canon, even though it is remarkably accomplished for someone so young. It consists of sculpted portrait busts, ranging from a heroizing image of her thirteen-year-old brother in a toga to a self-consciously realistic portrait of the elderly family maid. The only real flaw in the work of this period is Claudel's tendency to concentrate on the surface. Claudel's modeling, even of the wrinkled face of the maid, only goes so deep, so that we are always aware of a solid, unarticulated mass beneath the surface instead of an underlying structure of bone or sinew.

The work done between the break with Rodin in the early Nineties and Claudel's

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institutionalization in 1913 is more difficult to summarize, but surely it suffers from the absence of Rodin's guiding influence. Some pieces are cloyingly sentimental, like *The Little Mistress* (1893-94), the bust of a young girl gazing earnestly and innocently upward, like Oliver Twist asking for more. Others take the form of vapid, Rococo narrative sculptures. *The Gossips* shows three Renoir-like nudes intently listening to a fourth addressing them. *The Wave* has three bronze nymphs cavorting under the looming swell of an imminently breaking wave. This piece introduced precious materials (the wave is carved onyx). Although this was a common practice at the time, it was disapproved of by both conservative academicians and the innovative Rodin, which may have been the reason it appealed to Claudel.

It is clear from comparing these two periods that Claudel's contact with Rodin released something that transformed and sustained her sculpture. From Rodin, Claudel apparently learned a greater freedom and vividness of modeling, the use of bodily gesture to convey emotion, the expressive cropping of the figure, and a lyricism that turned easily into a Rodinesque eroticism. But was all this—we are meant to wonder—learned from Rodin? Or was it already there?

It is easy to believe it was learned, since Claudel came to Rodin so young. Precocious as she was, it is unlikely that she would have had time to develop an independent aesthetic. On the other hand, both Paris and Grunfeld tell the story of Paul Dubois, then the director of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, looking at Claudel's work in 1883 and asking her if she had studied under "Monsieur Rodin," this just before the two artists met. Most likely Claudel, though not the type of sculptor to have made, by herself, the sort of discoveries Rodin did, at least was working in such a way as to profit quickly from what Rodin had to teach her.

Certainly his impact was felt almost at once, and completely. Within a year of becoming his student, Claudel was at work on *Torso of a Woman Squatting,* a foot-high figure without a head, arms, and most of the left leg, whose crouching posture and slight twist to the torso endow it with a taut dynamism. Yet once under Rodin's sway, Claudel was never really able to deviate from the master's subject matter or form, which is one reason it is hard to believe Paris's claim of influence travelling in the other direction. The embracing nudes in *Abandon* (1888-1905) are but slightly adjusted versions of the couple in Rodin's *Eternal Idol* (1889). And the woman's pose is taken almost exactly from Rodin's *Adam* of 1880. Only in *The Waltz,* which depicts two lovers spiraling into space on a craggy drapery swirl, and *Maturity,* in which an old man (supposedly Rodin) is led away by a hag (Rose Beuret) from an imploring nymph (Camille), does Claudel pull somewhat clear of Rodin's powerful artistic attraction. But in these two works what we have is Rodin's style put to the service of a *pompier* sensibility. Otherwise, Claudel's career vividly illustrates what Brancusi meant when he said of his departure from Rodin's studio, "Nothing can grow in the shadow of the great trees."

Claudel does her best work in her sculpted portrait busts, perhaps because, with her subjects "given," she had no need to borrow Rodin's and could simply benefit from his formal innovations. Her portraits have the vitality and active surface of Rodin's busts, yet at the same time point up the essential differences between the two artists. Claudel's Rodinesque treatment of form only goes far enough to describe the appearance and intimate the character of her sitters, stopping short of the larger statements about art and the human condition for which Rodin is so well known. Similarly, Claudel's busts have none of Rodin's fluidity—that feeling of form coalescing out of liquid matter—nor any of his Impressionist, form-dissolving play of light across the surface. As with her early works, one is aware of the persistence of a solid core of form undisturbed beneath the surface activity, even if this is somewhat offset by a new awareness of the body's architecture.

When seen next to Rodin's work, Claudel's approach to form clearly speaks of a

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lingering classicism. There is a desire to hold onto the stable world of appearances and things rather than acknowledge the more modern condition that saw the visible realm as a constant flux, an outlook expressed in the work of Rodin, Monet, and, later, Cézanne.

If Claudel's portraits are on the whole less psychologically penetrating than those of her mentor, they are still works of considerable distinction. Her 1892 head of Rodin departs from the romanticized genius-dreamer who was popularized by Edward Steichen's 1902 photograph, substituting instead a vision of Rodin as he must have appeared to his sitters, his eyes riveted on something in front of him. And her *Bust of Madame Bouchard,* a left-facing nude with closed eyes, is a *tour de force* of portraiture. Claudel has here fixed two competing states, giving us a scrupulously realistic account of the model's ascetic exterior appearance while powerfully evoking a mood of interior reverie.

In spite of Claudel's evident indebtedness to Rodin, she was capable of producing some breathtaking moments of her own, as the Washington exhibition made clear. Her forte was modeling on a small, even intimate scale—her sculpture tends to be good in inverse proportion to its size. *Diana,* for example, a seven-inch plaster bust, has the immediacy of a sketch and the presence of a full-sized work. In the delicacy and sensitivity of *Hand,* about the size of *Diana,* it is easy to see why Rodin entrusted the hands of his own work to her.

The most startling thing about the Washington show was the discovery that, for all her debt to Rodin, Claudel showed the promise of independence. In the smaller works, the germ of a bold impulse is visible, suggesting that she had not only absorbed Rodin's style but even glimpsed its implications. There is no disputing what the early *Torso of a Woman Squatting* owes to Rodin in its pose (which recalls his 1880 *Crouching Woman*) and its cropping of limbs. But Claudel has gone further in her treatment of the partial figure than Rodin ever did. He

Hannah Hoech, *Chinese Girl with Fan,* 1926

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was, he felt, merely trimming away distracting excess. For him, the fragment stood for the whole, the integrity of which he asserted by the attention he gave to the body's structure by cutting only at the joints. By contrast, Claudel cuts radically. In this piece, the arms are off almost past the shoulders, and the leg is cut from midthigh to ankle. Claudel's anatomical arbitrariness—combined with the figure's dense, compact silhouette—hints at a conception of the figure as, in part, an object. Thus, she takes a small but crucial step in the direction of abstraction. In *Torso of a Woman Squatting,* she prefigures such later object sculptures as Matisse's 1908 *Small Crouching Torso,* likewise headless and armless and, at roughly three inches in length, meant to be handled rather than attached to a base. And, of course, she makes us see Brancusi on the horizon.

In Claudel's sculptures of animals, a similar tendency is evident. The beast in *Dog Gnawing on a Bone* (1898) crouches low to secure a good purchase on its trophy, a pose which, in the hands of a sculptor like Barye, was tailor-made for displaying torsion and musculature. But Claudel's modeling of the dog pays scant heed to the underlying anatomy. Instead, her surfaces consist of numerous miniature facets and shallow indentations, accompanied by a sharply defined contour. As an *animalière,* Claudel is a link in the transitional chain running from Barye's vigorous realism to the later, stylized abstractions of Elie Nadelman.

In the end, then, Claudel's achievement appears to have been more modest than her recent publicity would have us believe. She was a good sculptor, but not a great one, and was good in large measure because of her association with Rodin. One can speculate on what role she might have played in the sculptural revolution then underway had she been able to pursue a normal career, but speculation never takes one very far. It may be painful to let go of some of the myths surrounding Claudel, because myths are easier to live with than reality. But it is necessary to do so in the interest of a larger kind of justice, in order that her work may be seen for what it is, not for what it might have been. This is all any artist wants, and it is difficult to believe Claudel herself would have felt any differently.

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Books

Jean Stafford's triumph

by Bruce Bawer

If there is one thing that David Roberts's new biography of the novelist and short-story writer Jean Stafford makes abundantly clear, it is that any essay about her should probably begin with her parents, her family, and her strangely tormenting childhood.[1] She was born in Covina, California, in 1915, the youngest of four children. Her father, John Stafford, was himself a writer of sorts—a genuine obsessive whose career peaked early with the publication of an obscure hack Western novel, *When Cattle Kingdom Fell.* From there it was straight downhill: selling his Covina walnut ranch in 1921, he promptly lost the proceeds in the stock market and moved his family to Colorado, where he spent the last forty years of his life writing and rewriting a bizarre magnum opus designed, in Roberts's words, to "set the world straight" on the perils of the American economy. His wife, Ethel, was the practical-minded one, a pleasant former schoolteacher whom Jean resented for her conventional domestic preoccupations, and who, once the increasingly destitute family had found its way to the city of Boulder, earned her daughter's resentment for taking in her sorority-girl classmates as boarders.

Stafford's life with this hapless couple—and with her beloved brother, Dick, and her remoter sisters, Marjorie and Mary Lee—had deep and lasting effects. As Roberts observes, after the move to Colorado "Stafford would never again know a day free of the fear of poverty and of social inferiority." Forever after, her feelings about both her parents would be a heady compound of love and shame, pity and resentment; and many of her actions, during her undergraduate years at the University of Colorado and thereafter, strike one primarily as desperate attempts to remove herself from the world of her parents, and to forge a distinctive identity. For instance, the young Stafford—universally described as fragile, shy, and sexually naïve—shocked her fellow students by becoming the nude model for a life-drawing class, and by idolizing, befriending, and moving in with Lucy and Andrew Cooke, a notorious artsy couple. The Cookes seem to have symbolized sex and freedom to Stafford, but their wild, bohemian demi-monde was shattered when Lucy committed suicide during Jean's senior year; long afterward, a still-devastated Stafford remarked of Lucy's suicide that "I am almost ready to write about it, although I have really written about nothing else ever." Indeed, though she never published anything explicitly based on her life with the Cookes, Stafford did give the names Lucy and Andrew to major characters in two of her novels, and dealt with her friends' memory in various subtler ways throughout her fiction.

Lucy's death did not put an end to Stafford's search for a separate identity. After her graduation from college, she studied

1 *Jean Stafford: A Biography,* by David Roberts; Little, Brown, 494 pages, $24.95.

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philology for a year at Heidelberg, and had barely returned home before she began writing bitterly condescending letters about her parents and country. "I *can't* stay in America next year," she wrote a friend, "until I completely repudiate the whole past and live in some foreign quarter." She didn't belong here, she insisted: "I have realized suddenly to my horror that I'm an artist + have to be with my fellow beings." Roberts describes how Stafford transcribed an affectionate letter from her mother, "underlined what she considered the more egregious Americanisms, and mailed it to her friends in Paris, moralizing, 'Well, all I can say is, it shore is a pity that Pa ever got hitched up with those fat McKillop girls.'" That Stafford would commit such a heartless act—an act so offensive that it's pathetic—points to a profound insecurity about her own independent identity; so little sense did she have of herself apart from her family—even after college, the Cookes, and Heidelberg—that she felt it necessary to insist, in this brutal manner, upon her distinction from her mother.

Roberts's book is replete with evidence of the young Stafford's deficient sense of self (though Roberts himself seems mostly not to notice). During her time in Heidelberg, for instance, Stafford was mesmerized by the Nazis: "I was swept along on the tide of this well-organized collective conniption fit . . . . If a recruiter had come by and asked me to pledge myself for the rest of my life to the [Nazi Party], in all likelihood I would have done so." A psychology professor at Boulder noted that Stafford was the most "suggestible" hypnotic subject he'd ever had. The principal reason why she didn't want to marry, she explained to an early beau, was that marriage would turn her into a conventional wife, a philistine: "eventually we would be Mother and Dad." So unsure was she, in short, of her identity as Jean Stafford, writer, that the only consequence of marriage she was able to envision was a gradual metamorphosis into a version of Ethel McKillop Stafford, housewife.

And yet when Stafford did take a husband, in 1940, she assumed the role of thankless helpmeet almost immediately. Of the man in question—Robert Lowell—she wrote that he "does what I have always needed to have done to me and that is that he dominates me." Lowell, of course, was not just any domineering man; the prep-school educated scion of a distinguished Boston family, he was the very personification of wealth, breeding, and Easternness, all of which intimidated her. He was also, alas, spoiled, irresponsible, and mentally unbalanced. In the spring of 1938, with Stafford in the passenger seat of his car and a quantity of alcohol in his blood, Lowell plowed into a wall at the end of a road in Cambridge, Massachusetts; while he escaped unscathed, Stafford's face suffered extraordinary damage. By all accounts, Lowell was less than remorseful over the incident; according to a friend, he regarded it as "just an accident, and he didn't feel responsible particularly. He looked up, there was a dead end. It was not his fault." Yet the accident was a crucial event in Stafford's life; though surgeons managed to restore her to relatively normal appearance, the accident had done permanent damage to both her looks and her health, and the fact of it hovered tragically over the eight-year marriage to Lowell.

That marriage was, from the start, an ambiguous enterprise. Once Stafford and Lowell had set up house together—first in Baton Rouge (where Lowell attended graduate school at LSU), then in New York, Tennessee, and Maine—she apparently lost no time in becoming, like her mother, the subservient spouse of an obsessive artist. While Lowell wrote poems, Stafford performed secretarial work and housekeeping chores; a fanatical convert to Catholicism, Lowell insisted, during their stay in New York, that she also do "Catholic work," and so she spent much of her free time folding papers at the offices of the *Catholic Worker*. (Lowell himself had a job—as a copy editor at Sheed and Ward—for a total of nine months during the marriage.) Even when she did find a few moments to sit at her typewriter,

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she often had to spend it typing Lowell's work rather than writing her own. "Lowell expected his wife to type up his poems as soon as he had written them," notes Roberts. "If on rereading he changed a single word, she had to type the poem over again."

In sum, Stafford seems to have given a great deal in her marriage and received very little in return. It is hard to escape the conclusion that, in marrying such a man as Lowell and in maintaining so self-abnegating a spousal role, she was essentially forsaking, for the time being at least, the hope of an independent identity, and capitulating to her own seemingly unshakable inner sense of identity with her much-despised mother.

It was in 1944 that Stafford—who before that year had published only one short story—became a best-selling novelist. *Boston Adventure* was not her first attempt at a novel; over the years she had worked on several different manuscripts, some of which she had abandoned, and some of which had been turned down by various editors. To any reader familiar with Stafford's later, superior fiction, her graceful, charming, but thoroughly stylized first novel reads like an out-and-out capitulation to the demands of the marketplace. It reads, as a matter of fact, like the work of someone with a weak sense of authorial identity, someone afraid to reveal a distinctive sensibility. Roberts suggests interesting parallels with Proust, James, and "the great Russian novels" (one might also mention Wharton). But to mention such names without qualification is ultimately misleading. In essence, *Boston Adventure* is one of those capacious, old-fashioned, atmosphere-heavy affairs, mostly decorous but with perhaps a touch of the risqué, that used to be written for respectable middlebrow ladies by such authors as Anya Seton, Margaret Goudge, Daphne du Maurier, and Nancy Hale; the chief difference is that Stafford is a far more stylish and intelligent writer than most of these women.

Like many novels of its kind, *Boston Adventure* concerns the dramatically improving fortunes, over a period of years, of an attractive young female—in this case, Sonie Marburg. The smart, well-read, endlessly put-upon daughter of a poor Chichester, Massachusetts, immigrant couple, Sonie spends her childhood and early youth working in a hotel and entertaining a secret pipe dream—that she might one day live with Miss Lucy Pride, a wealthy Boston lady who summers at the hotel and who, to Sonie, is the very embodiment of breeding and culture. Miraculously, Sonie's dream comes to pass: she becomes Miss Pride's secretary, and takes her place among the fashionable young folk of Boston society. Yet life on Beacon Hill proves to have its own sorrows, and by novel's end Sonie is dreaming of liberation from Miss Pride as fervently as she once dreamed of escape from her parents.

To read *Boston Adventure* is, among other things, to be reminded of Oscar Wilde's remark that one would have to have a heart of stone to contemplate the fate of Little Nell without laughing. Sonie is no Little Nell, to be sure, but she is almost ridiculously long-suffering, and the travails she must endure before the nearly five-hundred-page opus winds to a close are legion: her father abandons the family, her younger brother dies, her mother goes insane. Through all this, Sonie seems never to stop worrying, to stop working, to enjoy so much as an hour of her life; even once she arrives in Boston there seems to be astonishingly little light or beauty in her grim world. Nor does she really *do* much of anything; instead, she lets things happen to her. If she is to be compared to the protagonists of great novels, it is not to anyone from James or Proust but rather to such figures as Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss,* Hardy's Tess, and Dickens's rags-to-riches boy heroes; for in many ways, Sonie Marburg is an English Victorian heroine in modern American dress.

She is also, in a sense, her author in disguise. Like the young Stafford, Sonie longs for a world more sophisticated than that of her parents. If Stafford's authorial ambitions

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seem to have been fueled, in part, by her pained awareness of her father's thwarted hopes for literary glory, so Sonie's attraction to life on Beacon Hill seems to be related to her own father's frustrated hopes for success in America as a shoemaker. If Stafford's father was an author of Zane Gray-style Western stories who spent his last forty years endlessly rewriting the same book, so Sonie's father is a perpetual re-reader of *The Riders of the Purple Sage*; and if Stafford thought she had found a new family in Lucy Cooke, and later in her blue-blooded Bostonian husband, so Sonie thinks she has found a new family in the person of the blue-blooded Bostonian Lucy Pride. Read in purely biographical terms, *Boston Adventure* comes across both as a plea for pity by an author who is intent upon mythifying her childhood troubles, and as an unsettling fantasy of childhood liberation—for after her brother's death, her father's departure, and the onset of her mother's insanity, Sonie is to all intents and purposes an orphan. And, as Eileen Simpson once observed, Stafford, in her childhood, "had desperately wanted to be an orphan."

Remarkably, however, for all the autobiographical parallels, *Boston Adventure* has an extremely fabricated quality. It is, one might say, a masterpiece of false emotion. For a reader in search of something escapist, to be sure, it's a good read—an engaging, well-bred novel that is almost never rude enough to confront one with the shock of recognition. There are moments of wit, insight, and realistic dialogue, but nothing, really, that would offend or challenge a *Saturday Evening Post* subscriber. The characters, sentiments, and plot turns are all familiar—not from life, but from other books. The tone is lofty—sometimes almost absurdly so, as when Sonie (who serves double duty as protagonist and narrator) describes a dog-and-cat fight: "I saw the dreadful slaughter: the dog's eyes popping as he rent and strangled the creature, spittle mingled with blood, and I heard the cat's single wail of entreaty." When a neighbor remarks that Sonie seems pleased with her newborn brother, we are told that "immediately the words were out, a leaven commenced to resolve my wonder into the emotion the woman had assumed in me and my pity became protective." The Jean Stafford of *Boston Adventure,* in short, is an author who doesn't write "was ill" when she can write "ailed." Still, the novel does contain a handful of real-seeming episodes, most of which involve children; Stafford's insight into the sensibilities of the young, and her superb ear for their conversation, are evinced in a number of small, seemingly incidental touches:

> Betty Brunson, who rarely addressed me, was embracing a young elm tree near the door and swinging round it, her head appearing now on one side, now on another. "Hi, Sonie Marburg, whatcha going to do this aft?"

Stafford never again wrote anything as long or as popular as *Boston Adventure* (which was one of the three best-selling novels of 1944). Yet her second novel, *The Mountain Lion* (1947), marked an advance in every important way. Like its predecessor, *The Mountain Lion* is a story of childhood—specifically, of Ralph Fawcett (ten years old when the novel begins) and his sister Molly (age eight), who after a bout of scarlet fever have health problems that draw them extremely close to each other and set them apart from their schoolmates. (Like other characters in Stafford's fiction, Ralph and Molly feel superior to others on account of their delicate health.) They live in California with their mother and two stuck-up older sisters, all of whom revere the memory of Grandfather Bonney, a stuffed shirt who peppered his conversation with Latin epigrams and (as he continually reminded everyone) had once met Grover Cleveland; Ralph and Molly, for their part, prefer their mother's stepfather, the down-to-earth rancher Grandfather Kenyon. (As in *Boston Adventure,* then, there is an emphatic contrast between high-toned types and simple folk.) But it is not till after Grandfather Kenyon's death, early in the novel, that Ralph and Molly meet Kenyon's son Claude

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and begin to spend summers at the family's Colorado ranch; it is there, during their pubescence, that Ralph's health improves and he and Molly grow apart, the boy becoming attached to his uncle and learning to shoot, the girl—an aspiring author—withdrawing into her writing and developing an icy hatred for virtually everyone around her.

The novel's turning point comes when Ralph and Molly are on a train which is, not incidentally, passing through a tunnel. Ralph, who has recently experienced a disturbing sexual attraction toward his sister Leah, takes a seat beside Molly, who despite her intelligence and curiosity retains a childlike innocence that he feels slipping away from him:

> Partly he did not wish her to read any further in his face and partly he wanted to feel her near by. He thought of her as if she were the last foothold beneath which the world fell away in a chasm: it would be so easy to lose his footing, relax his fingerholds, and plunge downward to wedge his bones in a socket of rocks. Vile fogs baffled him and vileness was below him. Molly, alone, he thought, did not urge him to corruption.

And yet something—namely, the hormonal urge that accompanies the onset of manhood—compels him to despoil the purity that Molly represents. Aware that he is "weakening and ready to fall," Ralph whispers to his sister: "Molly, tell me all the dirty words you know." Before she can respond, the train emerges into the light of day, and the chapter concludes:

> Ralph's childhood and his sister's expired at that moment of the train's entrance into the surcharged valley. It was a paradox, for now they should be going into a tunnel with no end, now that they had heard the devil speak.

It is only a matter of time before the division between Ralph and Molly reaches its tragic apotheosis. Ralph, who has been eager to kill a mountain lion rumored to be in the

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vicinity of the Kenyon ranch, sees and fires at the lion one day in the underbrush—but, instead, accidentally kills Molly.

Here, as in *Boston Adventure,* the parallels to Stafford's own life appear meaningful. Molly and Ralph are clearly based on Stafford and her brother, Dick, to whom she felt very close (and who had died in an automobile accident soon after the publication of *Boston Adventure*); the children's older sisters are based on Stafford's sisters. Like Sonie Marburg's mother, moreover, Mrs. Fawcett reflects, to a considerable degree, Stafford's view of her own mother: she is a foolish, vain, and superficial woman whose dearest wish is that her son become a "gentleman" like Grandfather Bonney and that her daughters be proper "ladies." As for the father, if in *Boston Adventure* Stafford removed Mr. Marburg from the scene after a few chapters, in *The Mountain Lion* she kills off the children's father before the novel even begins. Though the bulk of the novel is told from Ralph's point of view, it is Molly with whom the author plainly identifies, and who gradually becomes the center of interest. The girl is bright, introverted, obnoxious, and frighteningly eccentric; but the principal fact about her is that, as she approaches adulthood, she is—by virtue of her identity as an aspiring artist, a budding intellectual, and a sickly girl whose innocence refuses to die—increasingly alienated from the robust, physical, masculine environment of the ranch, and even from Ralph, who is fast growing into an altogether average young man. Plainly, Stafford's second novel can be read as a symbolic rendering of the author's own sense of isolation from her family—and, indeed, from the world—and its ending can be understood as a means of sacrificing her own life, in fiction, to save her brother's.

But of course it is not the novel's autobiographical subtext that makes it valuable; to overemphasize such matters, in fact, is to divert attention from the book's aesthetic import. And the fact is that *The Mountain Lion* is one of the most admirable short novels of its time—elegantly structured, deftly composed, and sensitively imagined. It is as taut and well constructed as a short novel by Henry James, as free of superfluities as *Boston Adventure* was swimming in them; its prose, furthermore, is as lean and temperate as that of Stafford's first novel was mannered. All of the characters are artfully drawn, but it is the portrayal of the children that qualifies the novel as a *tour de force.* For Stafford captures the world of childhood in masterly fashion, rendering details, dialogue, and thoughts for pages on end without a noticeable misstep. To recapture the way one's own mind worked at the age of eight or ten or twelve is among the most difficult of challenges for a writer, and in *The Mountain Lion* Stafford accomplishes this feat magnificently. Like Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (which would appear a year later), *The Mountain Lion* is an emblematic account of the death of childhood, the end of innocence. If it has a failing, it is that the ending feels more than a bit contrived; yet there is, at the same time, a symbolic appropriateness and inevitability about it that makes it work.

The last of Stafford's three published novels, *The Catherine Wheel* (1953), presents us with yet another child. Twelve-year-old Andrew Shipley is spending the summer at the New England country house of his cousin Katharine Congreve, a beautiful, charming Boston spinster in her early forties whose intimate tie with Andrew's parents is regarded as "the most winning friendship in Boston." Andrew's story—which takes place entirely during this one summer—is reminiscent in many ways of *The Mountain Lion.* Like Molly, Andrew is a sensitive, imaginative isolato. Just as Molly comes to feel rejected by her brother, so Andrew feels abandoned by his only friend in the world, Victor Smithwick, the son of his cousin's seamstress; just as Molly's brother is busy hero-worshipping his uncle, so Andrew's friend is preoccupied with his older brother, a Navy man whom he idolizes, and who is at home with a serious illness. Like Molly, too, Andrew has a pair of silly, conventional

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sisters and a mother who is much closer to them than to him; and just as Molly's mother leaves her at the family ranch while she circles the globe with her older daughters, so Andrew's parents leave him at Katharine's country house while they spend their summer in Europe.

Andrew is not, strictly speaking, the only protagonist of *The Catherine Wheel*. Chapter by chapter, Stafford alternately focuses on Andrew, who secretly pines for Victor and hopes that the boy's brother will either die or recover and leave, and Cousin Katharine, who has her own secret preoccupation: she's been conducting a clandestine romance with Andrew's father, whom she has loved for twenty years, and is waiting to hear whether he will divorce his wife. Neither Andrew nor Katharine is aware of the other's hidden torment; each nervously interprets the other's occasional show of anxiety as evidence that his own deepest thoughts have been perceived. Together they agonize alone, neither receiving an ounce of comfort from the other. This situation persists until the end of the summer—and of the novel—when Katharine is burned to death in a fireworks accident.

The Catherine Wheel is an unusual novel—and, in many ways, a satisfying one. The principal characters are vividly imagined, and the prose is as finely crafted as in *The Mountain Lion*; the central dramatic situation, moreover, is skillfully and often wittily managed, and Stafford's central point—namely, that we all live in individual worlds, obsessed, in spite of our best intentions, with our private dilemmas—certainly comes through clearly. Ultimately, though, the novel is less effective than Stafford must have hoped it would be. A large part of the reason is the ending. Like *The Mountain Lion, The Catherine Wheel* concludes in a burst of symbolism. Significantly, the fireworks device that kills Katharine is a Catherine wheel—a rapidly spinning wheel of colored fire, also known as a pinwheel, which is typically nailed to a tree; this, the novel's main symbol, serves much the same function as the mountain lion in Stafford's second book. We are told that when Katharine first fell in love with Andrew's father—who on that same night fell in love with his wife-to-be—there was a Catherine wheel spinning; we are reminded that the wheel is the symbol of the martyr Catherine ("They tied her to a thing like that and set it spinning, but it broke before it killed her and then they chopped off her head"); and we are informed that Katharine has ordered an image of the wheel carved into her own gravestone.

A comparison of the endings of this novel and *The Mountain Lion* is highly instructive. *The Mountain Lion* ends with the appearance of the eponymous feline and the death of Molly; *The Catherine Wheel* concludes with the appearance of the eponymous wheel and the death of Katharine. As critics have noted, both endings involve a *deus ex machina* and are thus less than completely pleasing; but there is a clear difference between them. For, despite its artificiality, the conclusion of *The Mountain Lion* manages to be quite affecting, and indeed feels somehow *right*—partly because the story is so symbolic in tone to begin with, and perhaps also in part because the conclusion represents an expert tapping into the reader's unconscious storehouse of myths and emotions relating to childhood, family, and growing up. Besides, whereas it is the fire from the Catherine wheel that kills Katharine, it is not the lion but her brother who kills Molly. And the act is a direct—if hardly an inevitable—consequence of the changes that both children in *The Mountain Lion* have undergone: Molly has increasingly kept to her own company, prowling quietly around the ranch and examining the local fauna (which would explain her sudden appearance in the brush); her brother has become more of a "man," incautiously gun-happy. Hence the killing of Molly has both credibility and import. The conclusion of *The Catherine Wheel,* by contrast—for all of Stafford's skilled foreshadowing—has a facile, phony quality; Katharine's death comes off as a freak accident, and the image of the Catherine wheel has no more resonance than a naughty limerick.

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By the time *The Catherine Wheel* was published, Stafford's life had changed enormously. As her marriage to Lowell disintegrated, Stafford's life fell into a grim routine of insomnia, heavy drinking, and nervous breakdowns; after Lowell left her in 1946 she broke down completely and spent most of the following year as a patient at the Payne Whitney Clinic of New York Hospital. Eileen Simpson's observation that Stafford seemed "relieved" and "comfortable" to be at Payne Whitney is not surprising; indeed, it is consistent with Stafford's lifelong preoccupation with characters, Sonie Marburg among them, who long for refuge with strangers, for a home away from home. Bestsellerdom, surely, provided no such refuge. When, some time after their estrangement, Lowell expressed the hope that she would be recognized as the best novelist of her generation, she replied that such a turn of events "would mean to me absolutely *nothing*. It could not happen and even if it could, it would not make the days here less long nor would my loss of you be made up for." The truth seems to be that without the dominating figure of Lowell in her life Stafford was lost, directionless; that his rejection of her was so destructive of her mental stability seems to have been a measure not only of her love for him but of her continued insecurity, her inadequate sense of self—which, even after the financial success of *Boston Adventure* and the artistic triumph of *The Mountain Lion,* seems not to have been altered substantially.

Stafford's second and third experiments with wedlock were more conservative than her first. Following a brief marriage, in the early Fifties, to Oliver Jensen—a *Time* magazine writer who would later co-found *American Heritage*—Stafford wed *New Yorker* writer A. J. Liebling, to whom she remained married until his death in 1963. Both of these men provided a measure of stability (and Liebling, by her own testimony, brought her considerable happiness), but Stafford's life continued, for the most part, to be an emotional roller coaster. Though she lived until 1979, passing her last fifteen years in relative seclusion on Long Island—as much of an isolato as Molly Fawcett or Andrew Shipley—she never completed another novel after *The Catherine Wheel.* Why? Perhaps part of the explanation is that once she had satisfied herself that she'd *made* it—in other words, that she had accomplished what her father had never done—her driving motivation to write was gone. For Stafford seems oddly to have been driven, at once, to show up her father, to vindicate him, and to duplicate his long, pathetic, unproductive decline. In fact, in a manner eerily reminiscent of her father's decades of work on his economic manifesto, Stafford spent many of her last years laboring over a novel, entitled *The Parliament of Women,* that would never be published. And, as her father had once made a habit of mailing off cranky, never-to-be-published pieces to famous magazines, so Stafford devoted the final years of her career largely to intemperate articles ridiculing the use of the honorific "Ms.," noting the ruinous effects of television on the English language, and complaining about houseguests. (One of these pieces—a 1966 profile of Lee Harvey Oswald's mother—was published the next year in expanded form as *A Mother in History.*)

More importantly, Stafford continued to write short stories well into the mid-Sixties. Indeed, as her novels faded in the reading public's memory, she began to be known primarily for her work in that field, and, in particular, as one of the most celebrated practitioners of the controversial genre known as the *New Yorker* story. Stafford's short fiction, most of which was assembled in various volumes during the Fifties and Sixties and brought together in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Stories* (1969), represents one of the finest moments of the American short story. Witty, luminous, and impeccably crafted, her contributions to the genre are crowded with people named Otis and Meriwether and Fairweather, with troubled children and snobby society women, and with garden-party conversations reported word for word. Extremely long sentences abound, and the vocabulary is unusually

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rich: a single page of the story "A Modest Proposal" contains the words *concupiscently, nares, sybarite, mufti,* and *cereus.* Yet Stafford succeeds in fashioning a lucid, well-upholstered style into which such words fit very gracefully.

To read *The Collected Stories* is to note the recurrence of certain themes, many of which recall the preoccupations of Stafford's life as well as the plots of her novels. The book abounds in protagonists who are, to some extent, Sonie Marburgs—unsatisfied with their lot and eager to be taken into someone else's world. In "The Bleeding Heart," for instance, "a Mexican girl from the West" named Rose Fabrizio longs to be adopted by a mysterious elderly man who visits the New England library where she works; but her illusions about the man are soon shattered. The most prominent of Stafford's themes, indeed, may well be the shattering of illusions—the illusions of Americans about Europe, of Westerners about the Eastern seaboard, of poor people about the rich, of naïve young people about the *beau monde.* One story after another seems to derive in some way from the young Stafford's encounter with Lucy Cooke's bohemia, with the *Kultur* of Heidelberg, or with Robert Lowell's Boston. In "Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience," a girl from Nashville on her first trip abroad is intimidated into silence by a host of rich and titled folk at a garden party in France; in "The Echo and the Nemesis," Sue Ledbetter, an American student in Heidelberg, feels painfully inferior to the more worldly Ramona Dunn; in "The Healthiest Girl in Town," a girl named Jessie is made to feel *déclassé* by two well-to-do schoolmates who regard their delicate health as a sign of privilege. (Like Ralph and Molly Fawcett, they're *proud* of their illness.) Time and again, however, sophistication is revealed to be a mask for vulnerability, for failure, for loneliness, for a history of personal tragedy. And tragedy is certainly plentiful in these stories. Just as Stafford lost her brother immediately prior to the appearance of her first novel, so some of her characters are struck by tragedy on the threshold of their greatest joy. In the deeply haunting story "The Liberation," for instance, Polly Bay—who has been saved from a life of eternal spinsterhood in her aunt and uncle's tomblike Colorado house by a proposal of marriage from a wonderful young Harvard professor—learns just before her would-be triumphal departure that her fiancé has died.

Naturally, some of Stafford's stories are more impressive than others. Aside from the ones I have named, Stafford's strongest stories include "A Country Love Story," "The Interior Castle," and "An Influx of Poets." But even her weakest stories are a joy to read, if only because their prose is so lovely. The deficiencies that they do manifest are, for the most part, those which are notoriously characteristic of *New Yorker* short stories in general. For instance, like many a fiction writer associated with that illustrious magazine, Stafford places a good deal less emphasis on plot than on character. This is, to be sure, not always a weakness, but it is hard to read the *Collected Stories* in sequence without eventually becoming irritated by their mostly ambiguous, well-nigh pretentious endings; one has the feeling that the author doesn't want to push too far, doesn't want to face the difficult choices attendant upon reaching the conclusion of a story, doesn't want to risk sentimentality or conventionality or melodrama. The contrast with the emphatic sense of closure achieved in *The Mountain Lion* and *The Catherine Wheel* is striking; and the result is too often a denouement that feels dry to the point of heartlessness and pat to the point of meaninglessness. Another *New Yorker*ish problem is that the stories tend to be cluttered up with gratuitous details—inventories of clothes, furnishings, meals, and the like, with a frequent emphasis on the hoity-toity.

A failing more specific to Stafford's stories is that her sarcasm toward a character sometimes overwhelms her sympathy. This is true, for instance, of "A Polite Conversation," in which a recently married young woman is forced to endure a visit to her new home by a rich lady who lives nearby. The

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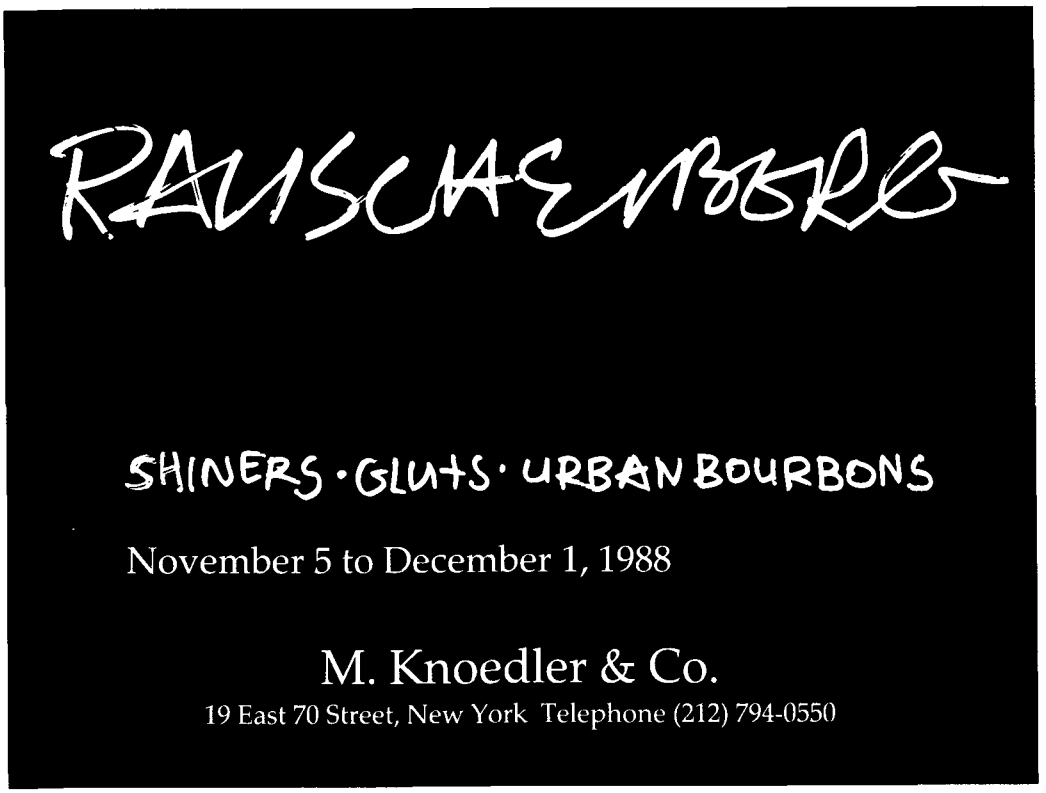
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only apparent point of the story is to make fun of the lady, who in her fatuity, condescension, and bigotry is rather too easy a target—not to mention a very familiar one, whose like (in male and female form) may be found throughout Stafford's fiction. These stories, then, are not without serious flaws; to compare them to the short fiction of John Cheever—and especially to that of Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor—is to notice, on Stafford's part, a relative want of sympathy and narrowness of range. Cheever's stories are more inventive than hers, Welty's more playful and abundant, Taylor's more thoughtful; Welty's and Taylor's stories, moreover, seem markedly *realer* than Stafford's, more significant, more profoundly human. Yet the very fact that one is compelled to speak of Stafford in the company of such masters is to acknowledge that her achievement in the genre is of a very high order indeed.

Which, unfortunately, is more than one can say for David Roberts's biography. For despite the occasional insight, Roberts generally acts as if the biographer's chief obligation is to accumulate pointless and intimate facts about his subject: whom she slept with, what they did or didn't do in bed. To be sure, such details, handled with tact and sensitivity, can provide vital insights into a writer's character, and can even be humanizing; even the most clinical details will usually strike a sensitive reader as permissible, so long as they seem integral to a carefully executed, full-figure portrait of the subject. But the sleaze-to-insight ratio of this book is inexcusably high, the portrait of Stafford lacks technique and proportion, and the portraitist himself has all the delicacy of a rhinoceros. Really, what can one say about a serious literary biography that contains such a passage as this: "It is thanks to Hightower that we have the only objective testimony, sketchy though it may be, about how Stafford lost her virginity." (Gee, thanks, Hightower.) Or this: "It is entirely possible that this half-secret romance [with one Jamie Caffery] involved no sex. If it is true that Stafford and Lowell were never lovers, as

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she later claimed to Eve Auchincloss, then it is also possible that by 1948 it had been almost ten years since Stafford had made love with anyone (the last time having been her one-night stand with Hightower in November 1938)." Paging Leon Edel!

To be sure, in a brief passage toward the end of Chapter Ten, Roberts does speculate intelligently about the reasons for the asexuality that Stafford seemed to manifest after 1940, and sensibly associates this asexuality with the minuscule role played by sex in her fiction; but there is nothing in the biography to justify the inclusion of some of the grubbier anecdotes that he retails in its pages. Central to this book is the assertion that Stafford spent most of her adult life suffering from syphilis, and that she never told anybody about it. What to say about this theory? Yes, some of the evidence that Roberts marshals in its defense is compelling; yes, he has a point when he suggests that such a medical problem might help to explain Stafford's mid-life antipathy toward sex and motherhood; and, yes, if Richard Ellmann had come across such information about James Joyce he might have made use of it, too. The difference is that a Richard Ellmann would have provided a respectable and intelligent context for such a revelation, and would have found an appropriate tone in which to treat the subject; Roberts's blunt, insensitive approach, by contrast, reminds one of an article in a supermarket tabloid about the Sex Secrets of the Rich and Famous. In a great literary biography, every newly introduced detail helps to sharpen a steadily developing portrait of an artist's character in action; in the present book, however, the indiscriminate tossing out of every new fact and hypothesis only compounds the chaos. If an Ellmann, in other words, discusses a subject's medical history in a way that makes one think; Roberts discusses it in a way that makes one want to wash one's hands.

Roberts organizes his book as if it were not a biography at all but simply a rough sketch for one. He lumps together quotations about diverse topics for no other reason than that he picked them up at the same interview; he repeats information about a pamphlet that John Stafford published late in life, and about the inclusion of Stafford's first story in a magazine called *American Prefaces*. On one page he quotes a single telegram in two different ways. As for his prose, it is alternately workmanlike and terrible. He writes, for instance, that in her later years Stafford "still carried an ambivalent torch for Robert Lowell." In a sentence about Stafford and Liebling, he manages to be both tacky and clumsy: "It is not clear how physically amorous the relationship was." Roberts claims that he was first attracted to Stafford by the beauty of her prose; but how could any writer who respected beautiful prose permit a book of first-draft quality to be published under his name?

The inclusion of some materials in this biography is downright baffling. Roberts quotes a rejection slip from the *Atlantic Monthly*, indulges in dopey chatter about his eagerness to know "what went on inside the mind and heart of this enigmatic 'coed,'" and puts unnecessary quotation marks around words like *coed*. He specializes in the self-evident: "Had Jean Stafford never become a writer, her family would have passed into oblivion unprobed." A Coloradan himself, he breaks into gratuitous anthems of praise for the state whenever he has a chance, describing the University of Colorado's summer writers' conference as "an illustrious event," referring to the state's "renowned" World Affairs Conference, mentioning (twice) that Thomas Wolfe once gave a talk at the university (and Stafford wasn't even there!), and writing that the university's 1932 faculty "included a number of scholars with national reputations and as a whole was significantly more liberal than any other body of intellectuals in Colorado." (The Denver Broncos, for example.) He devotes much of his epilogue to a series of "if onlys": "If only Stafford had married Robert Hightower instead of Robert Lowell; if only she had stopped drinking once and for all; if only she had exorcised the demons

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that her father, her sisters, and—at the end—her best friends came to resemble." Amen—but what's the point? If only Scott Fitzgerald hadn't met Zelda, if only Keats had been born after the discovery of antibiotics, if only Sappho had kept carbons! It simply makes no sense to speak of a literary talent as if it could be extricated from the soul in which it is embedded, isolated from the life experiences that have helped to shape it. The unwise choices of Jean Stafford's life and her finest writings are equally part of who she was.

And who, in the final analysis, was she? One cannot disagree with Roberts's valedictory description of her as "perhaps her generation's outstanding investigator of abandonment, voluntary exile, and self-estrangement." To read through her fiction is to be overwhelmed by a sense of the overwhelming distances between people; the typical Stafford protagonist is at a considerable remove simultaneously from those who have abandoned her, from those she has left behind, and from those with whom she aspires to associate. And Stafford, admirably enough—though her fiction draws extensively upon her personal life—keeps at a distance as well; that so emotionally fragile a woman, in fact, could transfigure the anguish of her childhood into a series of splendidly objective fictions would seem to be little short of remarkable. Indeed, if there is any value in the grimly detailed closing chapters of Roberts's book, it resides in the way that the darkness of Stafford's final years underlines the brilliance of her fiction. But the drama of this antithesis hardly justifies Roberts's emphasis upon such material. Patently, his chief purpose is to lend support to his conclusion that "Jean Stafford's career was a tragic one." It is of course fashionable nowadays for literary biographers to speak pityingly of their distinguished subjects, and to refer to those subjects' lives as "tragedies"; but no life that yielded a novel as fine as *The Mountain Lion,* and a body of short fiction that has few equals in the postwar American canon, can properly be called a tragedy.

Marx & English

Richard Ohmann Politics of Letters.
Wesleyan University Press,
319 pages, $25.95

reviewed by D. G. Myers

Richard Ohmann is, by his own accounting, one of the celebrity Marxists who are being paid rather handsomely these days to subvert the university from within. Although he admits that he waited to become a radical until after securing tenure at Wesleyan University, Ohmann has atoned for his early timidity. In the past two decades he has been a leading figure in the campaign to radicalize literary studies in America. In 1968 he joined in the *Putsch* on the Modern Language Association. At the MLA convention that year, anti-war radicals were arrested in a scuffle in the lobby of a New York hotel, one of those arrested was subsequently elected second vice-president, and the national guild of literary scholars adopted resolutions pledging to resist the government's efforts to conscript students and demanding an immediate end to the war in Vietnam. It was Ohmann who nominated Marxist scholar Louis Kampf for the vice-presidency and Ohmann in his capacity as editor of *College English* who served as chief apologist for the events at the MLA. Others as well as he have dated the escalating politicization of English studies from this first radical coup.

Since that time Ohmann has published *English in America* (1976), an examination of the various ways in which English departments contribute to the military-industrial complex; and now he has come forth with *Politics of Letters,* a miscellany of essays, lectures, scholarly papers, and talks to teachers. The present volume is the fruit of more than a decade's toil.

Like the earlier book, *Politics of Letters* is distinguished by passionate intensity, unswerving analysis, and the refusal to take anything in the academic study of literature for granted. Its prescriptions are those of someone familiar with (and weary of) the

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traditions of literary scholarship and the habits of literary scholars. But the new book is doctrinally sounder than its predecessor. As Ohmann says in a note, *English in America* "would have had more coherence if [it had been] firmly rooted in marxism [*sic*]. At the time," he says, "I knew too little of that tradition to make it my own, or write under its banner." In this new book, Ohmann has corrected the deficiency. Each of the twenty chapters of *Politics of Letters* is an exercise in the Marxist analysis of a different subject. Among other things Ohmann examines the function of English as an academic discipline (it conceals the way society really works), the process by which *The Catcher in the Rye* became a classroom text (its anti-capitalist message was blunted by critics), the need to revise the study of prose style (it must be made to reveal the inadequacy of men's adjustment to capitalist society), the rise of advertising (it created a climate of opinion congenial to monopoly capital), and oral history as a literary genre (it is devoted to making the privileged classes uneasy with their privilege). In short, Ohmann's latest book is a bravura performance in the application of Marxist doctrine to nearly any scholarly puzzle.

Though its analyses may (like its prose) be grinding, charmless, and predictable, *Politics of Letters* is invaluable in two respects. First, it serves as a useful anthology of the radical ideas in vogue in literary studies at the present moment. And second, it spoons out a generous, representative sampling of the sort of thinking now being offered in the name of radicalism in the university.

As a professor of English, Ohmann is principally concerned with two facets of the Western "system founded on exploitation"—literature and education. As a Marxist, he sees his part as that of "demystifying" this system—that is, of unmasking the true power structure behind it and the "rationalizations," the involved lies, used to prop it up. The ideas which Ohmann puts into play are not original; but if their widespread acceptance in the university is any indication, they are no less powerful for that. They are the accepted doctrines of literary study at the present time. Thus literature by definition is a commodity, the product of a social process (the writer who thinks *he* is the producer of his own work has only mystified his role); literary standards, the principles which govern the production of literature, are not really literary at all—in truth, there is no such quality as "literary"—but are rather a stratagem of the ruling class to extend its moral and political values into another domain; taste, traditionally described as the faculty of aesthetic judgment, "amounts to either class hatred or the snobbishness of the intellectual," and therefore can be more accurately understood as one of the powers of the elite; and, finally, literary language is an assertion of exclusiveness and superiority. By contrast, literature under the new dispensation will "create a new consciousness." It is the job of the Marxist critic, then, to clear away the remnants of the old consciousness.

The philosophy of university education which accompanies these ideas is no less political and deterministic. According to Ohmann, "what universities pay [professors] to do—teach—is our main political praxis." Teaching, in other words, is the whole focus of a radical professor's political activities. And the "praxis" of teaching goes hand in hand with a revised theory of instruction. To Ohmann's way of thinking, the traditional school exists only to reinforce divisions within society, to curb the aspirations of the lower classes—in a word, to serve the hegemony of the oligarchs. When a teacher corrects a student, he is not urging him to make a mental effort under criticism; he is assigning him a place forever in the class system.

There are deep problems with such a theory of the school. Ohmann is contemptuous of the mental skills and habits traditionally associated with a humanistic education—"punctuality, good verbal manners, submission to authority, attention to problem-solving assignments set by someone else, long hours spent in one place . . . ." He sees them as a function of class without recognizing in them the very disciplines of schol-

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arship and the life of the mind. It is difficult, though, to imagine how a child is to overcome his class origins without these skills and habits. Ohmann describes the school as yet another illustration of Antonio Gramsci's doctrine of hegemony; throughout the book Gramsci's name is a touchstone for him. But Ohmann's theories would have been repudiated by Gramsci himself. For Gramsci, who overcame his own squalid origins by dint of study, the traditional humanistic school was "oligarchic" not because of what it taught but because it was restricted to the children of the upper class. The skills and habits taught in school were not, however, a subterfuge for hegemony. "In education," Gramsci wrote, "one is dealing with children in whom one has to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise), ability to concentrate on specific subjects, which cannot be acquired without the mechanical repetition of disciplined and mechanical acts."

For Ohmann, by contrast, formal schooling must "empower" the student, even if it robs him of the power to cultivate himself; and it must liberate him, even from the preconditions of learning. The final purpose of education in this view is not to initiate the young into their culture; it is to deny them their culture in the fond hope that, without resources, they will somehow build culture anew. Given the cynicism of this view, one can't help thinking that the true objects of Ohmann's contempt are not the "disciplined and mechanical acts" performed in school but the students themselves.

By his own admission, Ohmann's ideas are not exactly original—"familiar truths," he calls them, the watchwords of "the 1960s reform movements, now much condemned" (though not by Ohmann). In fact, one way to characterize *Politics of Letters* is as an attempt to rehabilitate the ideas of the Sixties, to give them a sophisticated theoretical basis in Marxism. Ohmann describes the academic movement to which he belongs as a renewal of Marxism. In actuality it is the formalization, the Henry Higginsing, of the counterculture.

What is less familiar than Ohmann's "truths," and perhaps more striking, is the style of rhetoric which Ohmann enlists on their behalf. It's been said that a writer's rhetoric is a surer index of his true character than are the opinions he professes. By this measure, Richard Ohmann is a centrist, a standpatter. If he is at all representative of the academic Left as it exhibits itself today, it may be said that the Left has become the party of *fonctionnaires* within the university—the salaried experts and technicians dedicated only to preserving their power. For Ohmann's style is principally that of a man who is carrying out a mandate, who is implementing a policy, who has reduced Marxist analysis to a routine. He feels no need to argue his case. It seems glaringly obvious to him. "I can't prove any of this," he says at one point, "but I ask you to entertain it as at least a plausible explanation, one rooted in class." The style is chronic: "I may now air my prejudices with only slight interference from the facts"; "I can't prove it here"; "I cannot elaborate on or prove my case . . . ." Or again: after delivering a highly tendentious account of the way that television news suppresses class conflict in America, Ohmann maintains that what he has given is "only a description—not controversial, I think—of the class relations that surround television news." His expectation that such a radical analysis will not be viewed as controversial—only a neutral description—reveals much about his perception of his audience.

Again and again in *Politics of Letters,* Ohmann airs his prejudices with only slight interference from the facts. What is the reason for such an unconvincing mode of thought? It isn't that Ohmann fails to recognize that certain of his positions are currently under fire. He feels he must attack E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and former Secretary of Education William Bennett for defending the principles of excellence and traditionality in education. At the same time, however, Ohmann does not attempt to *refute* either man. For him it is enough to say that he personally dislikes Bennett and that he hopes Bennett's

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approving citation of *Cultural Literacy* has caused Hirsch "therapeutic discomfort." Ohmann knows, in advance, that his audience will not object to the way he handles his opposition; nor will it demand that he resolve the dispute between him and his opponents. For Ohmann's audience—for the present university community—there *is* no dispute. This is why Ohmann can, as he does in one essay, ridicule the phrase "freedom fighters" as "political legerdemain" and go on to describe President Reagan as the "Emperor of the Free World"—or why he is able to dismiss the "free market" as a meaningless abstraction and continue to speak of "popular revolution." He can rely upon his audience not to object to, or even to notice, his own abstractions and legerdemain.

The one purpose of such a rhetorical style is to reaffirm a sense of common cause among a party of the faithful. Ohmann would like the members of this party to be known as "critical intellectuals," but they lack the ironic self-reflexivity of true critics and intellectuals. In reality they are members of a party in power. What Ohmann's style of argument in *Politics of Letters* reveals is the high degree of consensus to be found today among the cadres of this party. The mere fact that radical ideology can now be taken for granted as the common opinion of readers of literary scholarship suggests that the Left has become the "center," the normative position, in the university.

Hunger artist

Mark Shechner, editor Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader. Wayne State University Press, 463 pages, $45

Isaac Rosenfeld Passage from Home. Marcus Wiener, 280 pages, $9.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

The writer Isaac Rosenfeld (1918-1956) seemed to his friend Saul Bellow like a Russian-Jewish intellectual; to Alfred Kazin, he appeared "as Old World as our fathers." But in fact he was an American, Chicago-born, who studied philosophy at the University of Chicago in the Thirties, came to New York in 1941, joined the famous circle of *Partisan Review, Commentary,* and *New Republic* writers, and died in Chicago at the age of thirty-eight. He is one of the more obscure members of the group known as the New York intellectuals, but he was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant.

Mark Shechner, an English professor at SUNY Buffalo, has edited a collection of Rosenfeld's work chosen from a book of essays (*An Age of Enormity: Life and Writing in the Forties and Fifties,* 1962), a volume of stories (*Alpha and Omega,* 1966), and selections from Rosenfeld's journals. Mr. Shechner's curious title, *Preserving the Hunger,* comes from one of Rosenfeld's most astute reviews, of Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky,* in which he argues that both the Jewish and the American soul are afflicted with an unappeasable metaphysical hunger, a permanent yearning.

Hunger—the baser, stomach-rumbling kind—is also the subject of Rosenfeld's famous essay entitled "Adam and Eve on Delancey Street" (1949), a gleefully naughty but penetrating discussion of Jewish food and sex taboos that nearly lost *Commentary* editor Elliot Cohen his job. The essay displays all sides of Rosenfeld's personality: the playful show-off, the serious Jewish thinker, the midlife worrier. Rosenfeld argues that to a Jew, the satisfaction of hunger is a substitute for other, never-to-be-satisfied hungers: to belong in a hostile world, to relax a necessary and constant caution. This, he says, explains the modern-day Jew's obsession with food, with which he tries "once more to satisfy this hunger which is not hunger, to drown this anxiety in the bottom of a paper cup."

Rosenfeld's own metaphysical hunger took an intellectual turn: he seemed always starved for knowledge, could not consume enough information. Rosenfeld writes in his novel *Passage from Home* of how the teenaged

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Bernard Miller, after reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, "had gone about for days in a great wild excitement, feeling there was light in me, strength and courage, an infinite capacity and hunger to understand life." We can be sure Rosenfeld is writing here from his own experience.

Saul Bellow has noted that "Rosenfeld had one of those ready, lively, clear minds that see the relevant thing immediately." His critical essays show a wide range of literary and political interests: Kafka, Gide, Stendhal, Isherwood, Orwell, Simone Weil, James T. Farrell, Anaïs Nin, Gandhi. Often Rosenfeld's acuteness can be cruel, though seldom without a point. Of Orwell's *Animal Farm,* he writes: "its political relevance is more apparent than real. It will offer a kind of enlightenment to those who still need it, say, the members of the Book of the Month Club, but beyond this it has no politics at all." Most Kafka criticism, he maintains in a review of a book called *The Kafka Problem,* "does not seem to know what Kafka is about . . . . It is for such reasons that 'the Kafka problem' lies mostly with its critics."

The sweet side of Rosenfeld emerges most completely in his essays on Jewish literature, a subject about which he is unabashedly sentimental, but no less acute. He writes lovingly of the Yiddish writers I. L. Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, whose humor is the kind that "loves the world from which it seeks to be delivered." Of the New York Jewish intellectuals, he was the only one to attempt to write in Yiddish; Mr. Shechner includes in his reader three of Rosenfeld's charming Yiddish fables in translation. Rosenfeld also achieved a small notoriety by writing a Yiddish parody/translation of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Rosenfeld's only completed novel, *Passage from Home,* is about a young boy's investigations into the interlocking worlds of his family, the nearby Jewish community, and the mysterious, alluring city surrounding his Chicago neighborhood. Bernard, fourteen, runs away from his demanding father and passive stepmother to live with his Aunt Minna, his dead mother's sister, a bohemian who has quarreled with the rest of the family. Bernard's embarrassed desire for Minna, clearly Oedipal, leads him to introduce her to his cousin by marriage, a down-and-out character named Willy. At first Bernard takes a voyeuristic satisfaction in the unfolding romance of Minna and Willy, but he soon becomes disenchanted with Minna's slovenly behavior, so unlike his fantasies, and returns home, where he and his father develop an uneasy understanding.

Passage from Home is not a very good novel, but it is an honest and often perceptive attempt to get at the heart of the relationship between this father and son. It is a sensitive and sincere book, if its prose is often ponderous and its action wooden; somehow Rosenfeld, who was clearly a much better critic than novelist, manages in his sincerity to make his failure seem a mildly heroic gesture.

In his introduction to the novel, Mr. Shechner makes much of Rosenfeld's feelings of alienation—he calls *Passage from Home* "a Dostoevskian novel in American garb," and claims that for both Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld Dostoevsky "came to be a symbol of their own post-revolutionary malaise." "Alienation" is an honored cliché among critics of the postwar Jewish intellectuals, but it is not a term that can be successfully applied to Rosenfeld's writing. While it is true that his political views included pained disappointment with the Soviet revolutionary example, in his writing on politics and literature, and especially in his novel, his mood is always one of engagement with, not alienation from, the world. Enthusiasm and disappointment seem bound up together in his spirit, pushing him toward new knowledge, toward the possibility of a distant satisfaction. Rather than reflecting an urge to escape, his writing leaves the impression that there was nothing that did not engage his interest.

If the writing itself showed no signs of alienation, however, in the last years of his life Rosenfeld's disappointment grew as his

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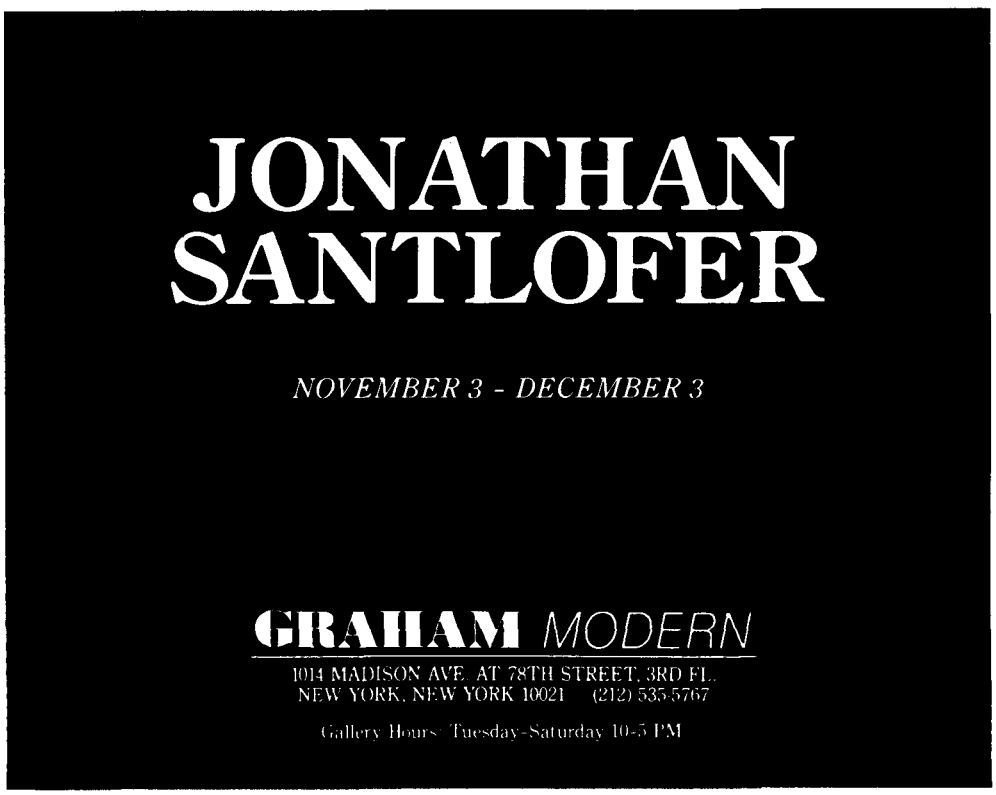
enthusiasm disappeared, and the fight went out of him. He drifted away from his family, grew less and less able to complete writing projects, and moved back to Chicago, where he lived alone in a dark, messy apartment. At thirty-eight he was dead of a heart attack. Many writers have deplored the fact that he did not live to complete a major work. But while it is indeed regrettable that a man so clearly talented did not, as the jargon goes, "realize his potential," one feels in reading Rosenfeld that in his prime his personality itself was his "major work," that it was the art of thinking and discovering to which he devoted himself, while his writing was merely spillover from his boiling intellect. His retreat at the end seemed an acknowledgment that his ideas would never be embodied in solid achievement; that they were fine, ephemeral things, destined to disappear when he disappeared, too early.

Mere careerism was not Rosenfeld's concern; the prospect of an unwritten "major work" did not nag him. As Saul Bellow wrote in his foreword to *An Age of Enormity,* "singlemindedly, Isaac was out for the essential qualities. He believed that heart and truth were to be had. He tried to fix them within himself." In his skittish search for "the essential qualities," in his apparent indifference toward his own literary reputation, Rosenfeld was a kind of minor tragic hero in the history of American intellectual life.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Letters

Daddy dearest

To the Editors:

When Deborah Solomon writes in her review of Musa Mayer's *Night Studio* (September 1988) that "Guston didn't really hate abstract art" she is wrong. Philip Guston made it clear in exhibition catalogues, books, interviews, talks, letters, and conversations that he came to hate abstract art. His eloquent indictment, and the implicit indictment in the work of his last decade, cannot be swept aside as sour grapes. Not, that is, if Solomon means to write an intelligent review of Musa Mayer's book.

Solomon has it that Guston could only paint "minor" abstract pictures and therefore hated what he could not do well. "Minor" is merely her opinion. *Attar, Beggar's Joys, Dial,* et al. will make their own case. But to leap from her shaky (she offers no evidence) assertion to inform us what it was Guston really thought is pure nonsense.

But Solomon either doesn't mean to or is incapable of intelligently reviewing this book. One of her limitations is a tin ear. When she characterizes Mayer as self-righteous for writing, "being a good father certainly was the least of his concerns while being a good daughter was . . . the greatest of mine," she clearly hasn't heard the quotes around good. Mayer isn't saying that while Guston couldn't be good she tried to be. She is saying that Guston was not disposed to be a conventionally good father but that she was caught in striving to be a conventionally good daughter. Meaning Guston couldn't fill the role society cut out for him while she tried to fill the role that other daughters have found less than good for them.

Solomon finds "enormous resentment" of Guston by Mayer in this book. It's simply not there. She has managed to misread this book as she has misread Guston's convictions and his art.

William Corbett
Boston, MA

Deborah Solomon replies:

Mr. Corbett's letter presents us with a startling contradiction. First he says that Guston was speaking from the heart when he said that he hated abstract painting. Then he challenges my assertion that Guston's abstractions were minor. It simply doesn't make sense. Why would Guston have hated abstract art if his own abstractions were the major statements that Mr. Corbett apparently finds them to be? I still believe that when Guston said he hated abstract art, he wasn't referring to Kandinsky or Malevich or Mondrian, but to himself, to his inability to endow the painted gesture with the full weight and force of his feelings.

It seems to bother Mr. Corbett to hear Guston described as a minor abstract painter. "Minor," he points out, as if alerting the reader to a bit of inside information, "is merely her opinion." Of course it's my opinion. Whose opinion should it be? Walter Cronkite's?

I might add that the forming of opinions is not nearly as capricious a matter as Mr. Corbett seems to believe. By calling Guston minor, I didn't mean to relegate his work to the trash bin

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of obscurity. There are good minor painters. There are bad minor painters. Guston was a good minor painter. He produced many good abstract paintings, but they didn't enlarge the tradition of painting in any way I can think of. Unlike, say, Pollock or de Kooning, or even the much maligned Franz Kline, Guston didn't invent a new style but rather worked within a pre-existing one, which is why I described him as minor.

Mr. Corbett feels that I was wrong to discern "enormous resentment" in Musa Mayer's book. It doesn't take a psychotherapist to see that a woman who devotes an entire book to her father's drinking, adultery, and failure to provide her with the attention she sought is not exactly an adoring daughter.

The canon under siege

To the Editors:

While there is no denying the provocative nature of Mark Helprin's "The Canon Under Siege" in your September 1988 issue, a number of his assertions strike me as mistaken. Mr. Helprin charges academia with using literature for political ends, discarding "traditionalist" works in favor of writing by "women, minorities, and people of color." I agree with him that judging literature according to the sex or color of the writer is deplorable. However, isn't it closer to the truth to say that academia is engaged in an impassioned argument over the merits of certain "traditionalist" works? After all, are the established writers to remain the only names on the list? Are they never to undergo a revaluation, a comparison with newer voices? Many "traditionalists" were not always so. They too waged a struggle for assimilation and acceptance. Mr. Helprin mentions Galileo as an example of a "traditionalist" dismissed by the academic "guerrillas" simply because he was a "white male." But there was a time when Galileo was dismissed precisely because he was not a "traditionalist" and his ideas were seen as threatening to the establishment viewpoint. I am not saying that we should discard Galileo or Dante or Shakespeare in favor of more contemporary or "politically correct" names, but rather that the debate and discussion that pits one group against the other should be allowed to run its course. Furthermore, academia is very definitely the setting in which the argument should air itself.

At another point in his essay Mr. Helprin writes: "Boat person and peer will choose and reject similarly, for the qualities of merit lie in the objects themselves rather than in the circumstances of those who perceive them." If only this were true; then the whole matter of critical acumen, taste, perception, and discrimination would be a simple affair. Everyone would acknowledge the superiority of a Proust, a James, a Nabokov. We know, however, that these writers are not immediately accessible and that only great readers, cultivated readers, can fully appreciate them. Proust wrote, "In reality, each reader reads only what is already within himself. The book is only a sort of optical instrument which the writer offers to the reader to enable the latter to discover in himself what he would not have found but for the aid of the book. It is this reading within himself what is also in the book which constitutes the proof of the accuracy of the latter and vice versa—at least to a certain extent, for any discrepancy between the two texts should be laid to the blame of the reader, not the author." Or put another way: "If an ass peers into a mirror one cannot expect an angel to peer back." Unfortunately "qualities of merit" are very much a matter of the "circumstances of those who perceive them."

Finally, while I am delighted at Mr. Helprin's ravaging of the minimalists I can only wonder at the timing of his assault. They have been busily producing their brand of fiction for quite some time. To rail at them now is a little like yelling "fire" when the barn has nearly burned to the ground. The armies of minimalist writers have advanced too far and Mr. Helprin's essay, much to our regret, can do little to check their progress. Nevertheless, those readers who perceived the dangers of the minimalist movement early on can only be gratified by Mr. Helprin's attack, however overdue it may be.

Marcela Breton
Huntington, CT

Mark Helprin replies:

I am grateful to Marcela Breton for her letter, and I will try to respond to her comments.

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In regard to maintaining or altering a literary "canon," she says that "the debate and discussion that pits one group against another should be allowed to run its course," one group being "the established writers," and the other, those whose ideas are "threatening to the establishment viewpoint." I suggest to her that the outcome of a struggle between groups is of far less importance than the appeal of reason and good sense to those who read, write, and think outside of groups. If the Muslims and the Christians fight at Tours, does the outcome determine who is God, or does it determine who fights the best that day at Tours? The answer is obvious and I will not belabor the point except to anticipate the rejoinder that no "established" belief is anything but the result of the political and perceptual victories of its proponents. I claim that this, in fact, is not so, and that the established canon (something which, in my essay, I took pains to describe as loosely defined and subject to continual revision) is determined by the same kind of process that makes the weather in the world. In a planetary weather system the infinite variations of a relatively small number of common laws and processes make ever recurring seasons that are never exactly alike but always strikingly similar. A civilization is much the same, in that a relatively small number of common themes and shared experiences can be expressed in an infinite number of ways that nonetheless have common threads running through them. The totalitarian impulse is to cut those threads and dictate new criteria (no pun intended) through one or another type of force, or what Marcela Breton refers to as "struggle." "Struggle" burned most of the Jewish books in Europe. "Struggle" elevated Socialist Realism and silenced Pasternak. "Struggle" gave laurels to D'Annunzio and suppressed Croce. "Struggle" destroyed the library at Alexandria, made Galileo recant, and deprived Van Gogh of an audience. What country is this, anyway? Syria?

As if enough difficulties do not exist in art without considering political interference a benefit, Miss Breton then goes on to inform us that "'qualities of merit' are very much a matter of . . . 'those who perceive them,'" and that "if an ass peers into a mirror one cannot expect an angel to peer back." I know this is not so, because I have read Shakespeare. An angel peered back. This is because literature is not a mirror, it is a window. Fascists, Marxists, and inflexible dogmatists of all kinds do their best to make it a mirror, but it resists. When it does, when despite their efforts they cannot see themselves but are forced to look out into a starry sky—because the glass is clear and true—they simply throw it out. Hence the demand at Stanford that the books on the reading list "reflect" the student body. Perhaps I am a freak, but when I arrived as a freshman, and thereafter, I had a great passion to know about nearly everything *except* myself. After all, I had been imprisoned in the myopia of childhood and youth for the previous eighteen years, and suddenly I had a chance to discover nothing less than the whole world. If today's undergraduates (and those of their professors captured by arrested development) are convinced that the great and powerful telescopic eye of literature is nothing more than a mirror that reflects upon them, and that the greatness of a Dante or a Raphael rests in the accidental abilities and political inclinations of later generations, they need most of all to study that history and literature that they do not want to study. It would show them by example that qualities of merit do reside in the thing itself rather than in the perception of it. That is part of the magic of Western Civilization and why they would do well to look into it.

As for the sentiment that my attack on the minimalists is too little and too late, because they "have advanced too far," I must report that I have been urged to lay off them because they are so much in decline and so pathetic. In both cases, horses were invoked. In this case, the horse (by implication) was already out the barn door before I attempted to close it. In the other, the horse was dead and I was cruelly beating it. This is positively Manichean. What should I think?

The answer occurs to me, and it is this. At the moment of their greatest success, those who have risen are most vulnerable, for it is from that point that they proceed downward. Hence the split perception. Needless to say, the best time to attack your adversary is when he has reached his very apogee. He has put all his cards on the table, his energy is spent, he has nowhere to go, and he presents a rich and substantial target. As a soldier, I was taught neither to fear nor to pity my adversaries. Perhaps that will explain the timing of my essay, and perhaps Miss Breton will forgive me for it.

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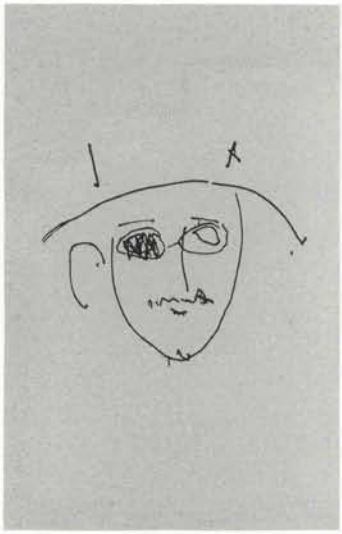

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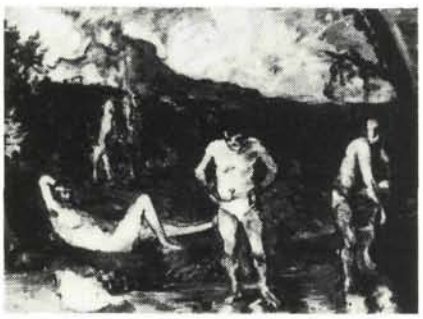

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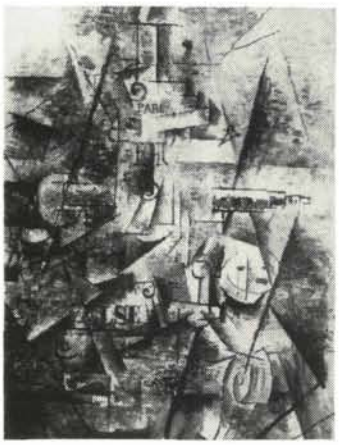

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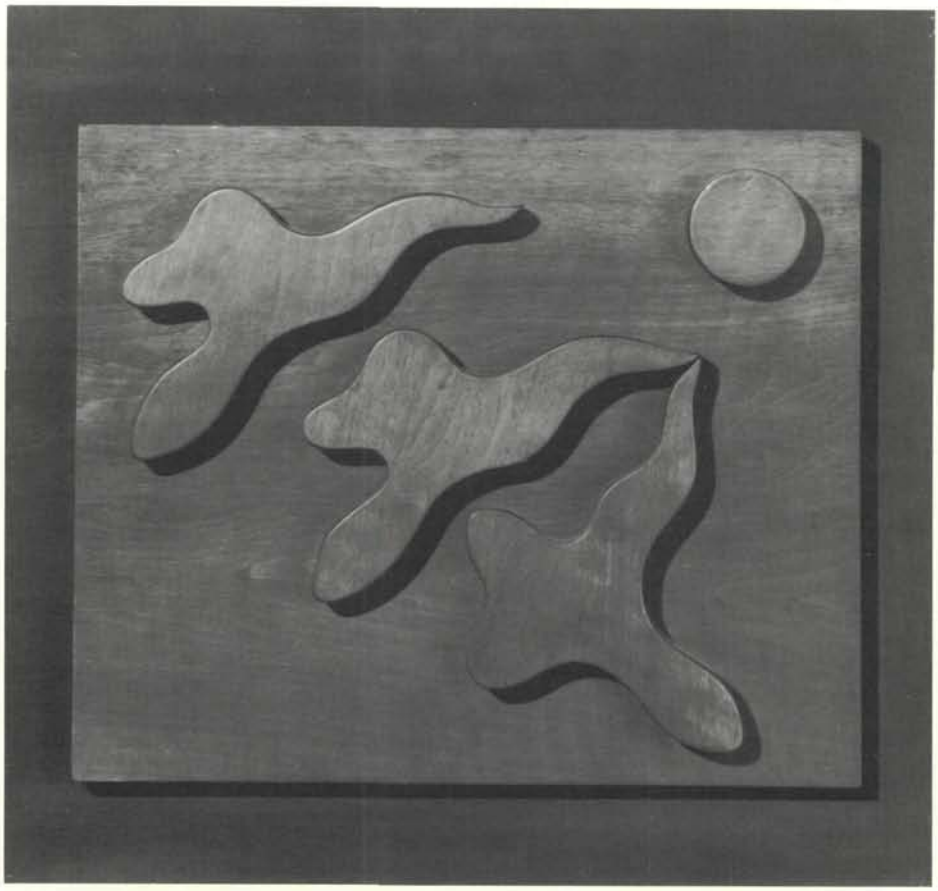

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